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Brian Stableford "L'Homme de Mars" by Guy de Maupassant

I. Introducing the Text

Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893), a protégé of Gustave Flaubert and an intimate of Émile Zola, was the foremost French short story writer of his admittedly brief era. He published his first collection in 1880, and went on to publish nine more in the next decade, along with six novels, before the deterioration of his health due to tertiary syphilis put an end to his career. His most considerable achievements were in the field of literary naturalism; together with the kindred works of Anton Chekhov, Maupassant's anecdotal slice-of-life stories and calculatedly low-key *contes cruels* helped pioneer and define the narrative method of the modern short story.

His reputation rests primarily on stories that focus intently on the minutiae of the everyday lives of mediocre individuals. As with Chekhov, however, Maupassant had another side to his work that paid far more attention to the human imagination and its products; he was fascinated by the phenomena of hallucination and delusion.

In most cases, Maupassant allotted such odd psychological phenomena the same uncertain and marginal role that they occupy in the lives of the majority of people. On occasion, however, he went much further, most notably in his famous *nouvelle* "Le Horla" (1887). In this story, a diarist afflicted by a mild fever and consequent depression records his speculations as to whether the air might be full of "incomprehensible powers" whose proximity affects the mind, eventually coming to believe that he is being tormented by an invisible creature. An item in a scientific journal persuades him that the creature must have come from Brazil on a passing ship, and that its species may be in the process of displacing humankind from dominion over the Earth. This narrative move brings the story into the borders of scientific romance, although the reader is presumably expected to believe that the speculation is merely one more symptom of the diarist's descent into madness.

Maupassant used "Le Horla" as the title story of one of his collections, and it has since been very widely reprinted. Interestingly, it was not the only marginally speculative piece he penned that year; the other, "L'Homme de Mars"—which was almost certainly written after "Le Horla" and might be regarded as an extrapolation of an idea raised therein—appeared in the 1887–88 issue of *Paris-Nord*. The latter story, by contrast, was not reprinted in any of Maupassant's collections, and hence remains virtually unknown.

Maupassant's reasons for leaving "L'Homme de Mars" uncollected are not obvious. Perhaps he regarded it as a trivial item of fancy, too *rescherché*, to be readily accommodated to the remainder of his oeuvre. It is more of a conversation piece than a story, but that is true of many of his stories, so it was probably the subject matter of the conversation rather than the mere matter of form that led him to set it aside. It is unlikely that he found reason to doubt the reasonableness of the scientific speculations that formed its basis—further observations made of the Martian surface had not cast any substantial doubt on the existence and implication of the canals by the time of his

Special From the French Issue

Brian Stableford Translates Maupassant
Two reviews of Élisabeth Vonarburg
Richard Parent on Robert J. Sawyer's Trilogy
Walter Minkel on Philip Reeve
David Mead on Scott MacKay
Russell Blackford on Robert Freeman Wexler
Tanine Allison on Lance Olsen
*Plus notes on C. M. Kornbluth, some Screed,
pictures of interesting persons, & an editorial!*

Two Views: *Dreams of the Sea* by Élisabeth Vonarburg, translated by Howard Scott and Élisabeth Vonarburg

Edmonton: Tesseract Books, 2003; \$13.95 tpb; 291 pages

reviewed by Jenny Blackford

In October 2001, Russell Blackford and I attended the conference on "Biotechnological and Medical Themes in Science Fiction," organized by the redoubtable Domna Pastourmatzi and held at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. The material in our conference bags included a copy of Tesseract Books's edition of Élisabeth Vonarburg's earlier novel *The Maerlands Chronicles*. (A U.S. edition of the same book was titled *In the Mothers' Land*.) The book in the conference bag was not there by chance: Candace Jane Dooley and Timothy J. Anderson were prominent on the conference program, and they are important members of the consortium that runs Tesseract Books, the premier publisher of Canadian sf.

A journey of more than a week in foreign lands is difficult for people who read; we could not possibly have carried around Europe the amount of reading material we required. We spent an inordinate sum of money posting a batch of books back home from Greece, but we left that fortunate gift, *The Maerlands Chronicles*, for the ridiculously long plane ride home to Australia. We were pleased that we did: It is a delightful book, and kept me happily occupied for much of the trip home. The book embodies a strange, complex and fascinating vision of a post-apocalyptic world. It is highly literary, intelligent sf, with powerful ethical and social themes, from an author with her own vision. Nothing about it is clichéd.

After enjoying *The Maerlands Chronicles* so much, I eagerly snapped up *Dreams of the Sea* when I was offered it for review. It is the English translation of the first volume of Vonarburg's important five-book French series *Tyrannuel*. Vonarburg has won many prestigious awards in her career, including both the *Grand Prix de la Science-Fiction et du Fantastique Québécois* (Canada) and the *Prix Boréal* in 1997, for the French version of *Dreams of the Sea*.

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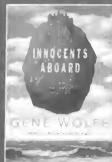
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John Clute



Kathryn Cramer, Michael Swanwick & Gordon Van Gelder

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Two Views: Dreams of the Sea

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Dreams of the Sea embodies a vision of an entire new world just as strange, complex and fascinating as *The Maelstrom Chronicles*. The novels are post-apocalyptic, or, more precisely, post-catastrophic—a series of disasters has effectively ruined the Earth, and the action of the novel takes place on the planet Tyrannal. Vonarburg created a fascinating alien planet, with a very long and mysterious history.

The story is told in short intercut narratives, some from a time when the aliens still live on Tyrannal, and some from a time after the Earth humans arrive to explore and colonize. As a result of psychic Dreams about violence between the races, the aliens leave the planet well before the human explorers and colonists arrive (presumably in a different time-stream). Semi-prophetic Dreams are very important on Tyrannal. They are known to be unreliable: "It is usually very difficult, even impossible, to locate in time the visions that occur in a Dreamer's universe... and even impossible to determine with any certainty if it is in fact the Dreamer's own universe." Nonetheless, the people of the planet decided to avoid any possibility of conflict with Earth humans by moving off-planet, to a place not revealed in this first volume of the series.

The narrator, Elai Lianon Klaidaru, is an old woman of the humanoid race native to Tyrannal. At the time she tells the story, she still lives on Tyrannal, waiting for the future to unfold, after most of her race have departed. As a child, she was the Dreamer who foresaw a future of war and slaughter. Later, she and others Dream of the humans arriving on the planet, and, finding it empty, peacefully colonizing it. Elai is a difficult, angry person, and her life is generally unhappy. She feels irrationally guilty about the huge upheavals her Dreams caused in the lives of her people. I was perhaps not as sympathetic towards her as the reader was intended to be. I often felt an impulse to tell her to pull herself together.

Almost the entire story is told by Elai in snatches of recorded Dreams, and it appears that all of Elai's source material is taken from Dreams. Virtually all of the Dreams seem to involve the dreamer experiencing for a short time the real life of someone else, one of the Earth humans or one of the aliens. They are usually, like Elai, difficult, angry people, struggling to cope with loss. But the earliest Dreams recounted in the novel are alien Dreamers' experiences of young Australian Timmi's dreams, real human dreams, with bizarre, unreal things happening (though they also show Timmi's own apparently psychic perceptions, and his foreknowledge of the coming of the Sea). This made for a confusing, though powerful, entry into the novel.

In a manner interestingly reminiscent of the bizarre theories about "angels" repeatedly interfering with human civilization (expoused in the works of Storm Constantine and others), the humanoid civilization on Vonarburg's alien planet Tyrannal was profoundly changed by a hugely powerful race. The godlike Tellen apparently interbred with the humanoids in the distant past, adding various psychic powers to the gene pool, including Dreaming. The reader assumes that the Tellen were also responsible for the creation of the mysterious Sea, a peculiar phenomenon that blankets the lower areas of the planet for half of the planet's long year. The Sea appears at one eclipse, and disappears at another. It is certainly not made of water, or anything like water, though boats of a sort can float on it. It cannot be detected by any human measurement device, and it causes all electrical devices above it to fail. Any living being that is submerged in it simply disappears, though inorganic material is found totally unchanged after the Sea disappears. It seems to be almost a psychic phenomenon.

The original humanoid inhabitants of Tyrannal were prepared for the Sea: the Tellen persuaded them to sculpt the planet at a macro level, moving from multiple continents to one and preparing huge "dams" and complexes of higher and lower cities, ready for the Sea to appear. However, the Sea causes huge problems for the humans, who are shocked and dismayed by its first appearance. The original exploration party loses many of its members—all those exploring below the level of the new Sea, when it appears, and those flying at a level where the Sea's influence causes their equipment to fail.

Through the intercut narratives, the reader gradually comes to understand a little of the complex and peculiar lives of the aliens,

before the humans came, as well as the process of colonization, with all its political, social, and practical difficulties.

An Australian reader may be slightly taken aback when the first paragraph, which is the dream of the Australian child Timmi, includes the clause "buildings bare their innards to the midday sun." For us, the word "innards" is foreign slang, reminiscent of *The Beverly Hillsbillies*, critics, and chitlins. We would say "insides"; we cannot believe that the child is Australian. However, overall, the translation is quite transparent, and ignorance of the niceties of Australian dialect is a minor fault.

More importantly, *Dreams of the Sea* is not as accessible as *The Maelstrom Chronicles*. The text makes few concessions to the reader. The technique of intercutting between short narratives in different voices from different time-streams is potentially quite confusing, and I found it difficult to work out the story at a basic plot level until well into the volume. The reader is introduced to many wonders and mysteries quite rapidly, and the added complication of brief, uninterpreted, intercut stories is unnecessary. The first few chapters, which had been difficult on first reading, were quite clear on rereading; I suspect that Vonarburg is so deeply embedded in the imaginative world of Tyrannal that the new terms and customs all seem far too easy, and she used narrative tricks like the intercutting to make it "more interesting."

Overall, *Dreams of the Sea* is a thoroughly impressive achievement, and I hope that Tessierat Books will soon publish translations of the remaining four books in the series. ►

Jenny Blackford lives in Melbourne, Australia

reviewed by Kathleen Ann Goonan

The best fiction does not explain. It tantalizes. Such is the case with *Dreams of the Sea*, by Elisabeth Vonarburg.

Vonarburg's Tyrannal series, which spans five novels, was originally published in French. *Dreams of the Sea* and the following novel, *A Games of Perfection* (now being published in English), won the *Grand Prix de la Science-Fiction et du Fantastique Québécois* in 1997 as well as the prestigious *Grand Prix de la SF Française*. In fact, all of Vonarburg's novels have been honored with prizes, including the *Aurora*, a special Philip K. Dick Award, a *Tiptree* Award, and the *Forêt du Livre de Saint-Etienne*, and others. Here we are in the hands of a very accomplished author, whose philosophical, social, and political musings are always intimately intertwined with an overarching concern about the nature of perception and consciousness. Vonarburg's oeuvre is intellectually challenging, yet it is anything but dry; it shines with her strong emphasis on character.

In *Dreams of the Sea*, we encounter a world—or, perhaps, many worlds—paradoxically transparent and opaque at the same time, for *Dreams* introduces more mysteries than it resolves.

The book is narrated, and filtered, by Elai Lianon Klaidaru. She tells us at the outset that she is an old woman. We later learn that she is an acolyte of a religion, the members of which are called the *alsandars*, with its own texts, paranoiacal gifts, and pilgrimages. A state of enlightenment is mentioned in conjunction with the Sea—a blue, foglike entity which rises in response to celestial events and absorbs living tissue, but leaves non-living objects intact.

Elai speaks of neighboring universes—universes of consciousness, if you will—where the essences of the characters inhabiting several are identical, or at least quite similar. Even, that concrete convergence of infinite variables, takes place, whereupon time, with its cargo of consciousness, diverges into the multiverse. However, the events Elai "Dreams"—experiencing them through the eyes of another person via memory plates—have the concrete weight of reality. In this way, Vonarburg strikes a balance between the episodic and effervescent nature of the book, which is a vast query into our dance with reality, and the shattered narratives of characters and places to which we will no doubt return in ensuing volumes.

Three planets are involved, several timeframes (some which may still be in the future of Elai and perhaps even influenced by the process of Dreaming, much as observation changes the observed), and two distinct waves of population from Earth: Elai calls those who come from Earth the Strangers.

The first people from Earth to encounter this planet were explorers, some of whom vanished tragically and mysteriously during the initial landing. The landing takes place during an eclipse involving two of the planets that circle one another in this newly discovered solar system. When the eclipse comes, the Sea rises, and drowns the explorers, leaving their stunned companions alive but carrying the memory of this tragedy as they establish their settlements, having lost communication with Earth.

These explorers, archaeologists and scientists, call the planet Prime. They respect the vanished inhabitants, regard them with wonder, and wish to discover the secret of their ancient, deserted (but beautifully intact) cities. The cities appear to have been technologically advanced, and there are suggestions that the builders were able to find a balance between technology and liveability, unlike those who are fleeing Earth. And they wish to understand the Sea.

The third planet, seen only in glimpses, is a ruined, ravaged Earth, from which colonists to the new planet are carefully chosen after communication is reestablished, several generations later. This second wave of inhabitants from Earth, who call the planet Virginia, are pioneers determined to make a go of it, to live within the mystery, mine its mineral riches, and build a viable habitat for humanity. Their mission precludes wondering too much about the strange properties of the Sea, as long as they can coexist with it.

But even this solid information is difficult to pin down; it takes a long time to come into focus. To step into this book is to be submerged in successive waves of event and character. Taking the long view, it is a disquisition, perhaps, on what it means to be an author, to pick and choose among points of view and points in time and assemble a narrative. But in the short run, as a reader, I found it at first hard to keep my feet. Early on in this adventure, I had to forsake my readerly urge to know and allow myself to experience. I gradually learned that I was in a world of twisted time, of mirrors that reflect at strange angles. *Bibi Dreams*, through the eyes of the Strangers, the mysteries of her own lost culture, for she and the cities and freezes and technologies they left behind are the Strangers of the settlers. Nothing becomes clear until the book is almost two-thirds over, but if you like Vonnegut's writing, as I do, this is to be expected and welcomed. Vonnegut always takes on great themes, planetwide, culturewide, cosmoswide. Deserted cities and vanished civilizations are some of her recurring tropes and, in a sense, a finished novel is a city deserted by the living author, an artifact awaiting rediscovery and rehabilitation by a new Dreamer.

I was taught never to write in books; to do so was to invoke the same powers that would cause the flag to burst into flames if it touched

the ground. Therefore, I make notes in my books with great transgressive pleasure. As I reread *Dreams* for this review, I found myself circling each new name, each new phrase. I was almost compelled to begin a compendium to keep track of the contexts in which they were mentioned. Rereading and thought are definitely rewarded; this is not a book that you can down casually. I came to the conclusion that the best approach is akin to that used when immersing oneself in epic poetry.

As in a poem, you can count on the fact that every word and scene is a valuable clue; one hopes for the focusing vantage point much as Elial hopes for explanations to be gleaned from the memory plates she accesses.

These memory plates are like transparent overlays which variously color Event, depending on who has accessed them and thereby added their own weight of observation. Vonnegut's beautiful, precise writing does not exist merely for its own sake, but throws further light on the mystery: What is the Sea?

It is a very real substance with a very real effect, but it defies analysis because it paralyzes scientific instruments. It is the very essence of non-rationality, an effect which confounds linearity and plays with time and space. The Sea resembles the collective unconscious; it is an ocean of images perceived by Elial. She chooses the order and says "I hold to my arrangement." Each fragment is conveyed with the intimacy of our own dreams, utterly familiar and at the same time foreign and unknowable. The difference between *Dreams* and dreams is that *Dreams* are the close point of view of the person who originally experienced the event, re-experienced through the memory plates.

One reaches the end of the book with a novelish sense of settledness. Elial's elegiac tone gives the book the kind of emotional closure that a novel requires, and beautifully links beginning and end. We finish where we began—but changed, having experienced the Elial's sequence of *Dreams*. If *Dreams of the Sea* were the only novel to consider in this story, it would be incomplete—unsettling and haunting, yet more than compelling enough to read for its own sake. Certainly, the text contains enough clues to assemble a viable and deeply satisfying experience, but hints at depths still to be revealed. We are only at the shore of this particular sea, where the people and events are imbued with that palpable sense of being which makes them real.

All novels, of course, are *Dreams*. Immersing oneself in Vonnegut's longer *Dream*, in the form of the entire cycle that is yet to come, will be the only way to satisfy. ►

Kathleen Ann Gorman lives in Lakeland, Florida.

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"L'Homme de Mars"

continued from page 1

death, and the figures relating to the sidereal period, mass, and volume of Mars are very close to those recorded in modern astronomical textbooks—but he might have become dissatisfied with their whimsical expression.

It is not merely the story's lightness of tone, but also a certain lyrical enthusiasm in the contemplation of its possibilities, that seems at odds with the inveterate pessimism that Maupassant's contemporaries considered to be his literary hallmark. While "Le Horla" can easily be read as a definitive expression of his habitual cynicism, "L'Homme de Mars" cannot, even though the story within the story is credited to a character whose only response from the narrator is a wry smile, and despite the fact that the character carefully undermines his own rapturous exaltation with a downbeat counterpoint.

From the point of view of the modern reader—particularly the modern science fiction reader—the atypical tone and attitude of "L'Homme de Mars" are its most interesting features. The fact that a man like Maupassant, who was notorious for the brutal sarcasm, obsessive fascination with human misery, and nihilistic view of the future that were visited upon him by the degenerative effects of syphilis, could obtain a momentary uplift from the contemplation of the star-strewn heavens and the possibility of life on Mars is sure evidence of the power of what modern enthusiasts refer to as "the sense of wonder." If that momentary self-indulgence came to seem slightly embarrassing to him, there would be more than one reason for judging that change of mind unfortunate.

Speculation about the possibility that Mars might be inhabited, and the kind of life that might be found there, was already commonplace in France in 1887. The notion had been popularized by the profuse writings of the astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), who had dealt with the subject in *La pluralité des mondes habités* (1862) and had compiled an early history of fictional representations of extraterrestrial life for comparison to recent astronomical discoveries in *Les mondes imaginaires et les mondes réels* (1864). The three fictionalized essays Flammarion collected in *Récits de l'infinité* (1872) included a comprehensive "biography" of Halley's comet and the far-ranging "Lumen" (1866-69), which took his speculations about the possibility of extraterrestrial life onto a galactic stage. It is conceivable that Maupassant was inspired to write "L'Homme de Mars" by the publication in 1887 of the first separate edition of *Lumen*.

Flammarion was to publish his own fictional account of Martian life in the patchwork *Uranie* (1889); other notable accounts that were published before the end of the century include Robert Cromie's *A Plunge into Space* (1890), Kurd Lasswitz's *Auf Zwei Planeten* (1897) and H. G. Wells's "The Crystal Egg" (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Prior to "L'Homme de Mars," however, only a handful of literary descriptions of Martian life had appeared, in most of which the intelligent inhabitants of Mars were effectively human, employed as models in the service of utopian satire. Maupassant is unlikely to have encountered the most notable examples—the relevant volume of Marie-Anne de Roumier's *Voyages de Mylord Cétan dans les sept planètes* (1765-66) and Percy Gregg's *Across the Zodiac* (1880)—so his acquaintance with the notion was almost certainly derived from reading Flammarion. He was, therefore, the first French writer of any standing to attempt to make literary capital out of the astronomer's attempts to apply rational extrapolation to the question of what kind of life might exist on Mars.

"L'Homme de Mars" is content to advance a single hypothesis, of no great ambition, and even that is immediately undermined by another—also exceedingly Flammarionesque—that is much more down-to-earth in spite of being hardly less Romantic in its expression. Even so, the fact that the subject matter is treated at all is rather remarkable. To the modern devotee of hard science fiction, the provision of an alternative hypothesis can only seem admirably conscientious, and to the modern connoisseur of the sense of wonder, the tone and quality of the story's reportage are bound to sound less flippant and sarcastic than Maupassant presumably intended.

Fortunately, "L'Homme de Mars" is not a long story, so there is no need for me to paraphrase it. There follows a translation, in its entirety.

II. *Martian Mankind*, by Guy de Maupassant

I was busy working when my servant announced: "Monsieur, there is a gentleman asking to speak to Monsieur."

"Show him in."

I perceived a small man, who bowed. He had the appearance of a puny and bespectacled assistant schoolmaster. His clothing was too large, hanging loosely from his thin body at every point.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur," he stammered. "Forgive me for disturbing you."

"Sit down, monsieur," I said.

He sat down, and continued: "Mon Dieu, monsieur, I am deeply troubled by the step that I am about to take, but it is absolutely necessary that I fix upon someone, and there is no one but you . . . only you. . . . Finally, I have plucked up the courage . . . but to tell the truth . . . I no longer dare."

"Then be bold, monsieur."

"You see, monsieur, the problem is that as soon as I begin to speak, you will take me for a madman."

"Mon Dieu, monsieur, that depends on what it is you have to say to me."

"Exactly, monsieur. What I have come to tell you is bizarre. But I beg you to consider the possibility that I am not mad, for the very reason that I admit the strangeness of my story."

"Well then, monsieur, get on with it."

"No, monsieur, I am not mad, but I have the distracted appearance of men who are more thoughtful than others and who have gone a little—so little—beyond the limits of the average mind. Just imagine, monsieur, how few people in this world ever think about anything. Everyone is occupied with his own affairs, his own fortunes, his own pleasures—with his own life, in sum—or with petty and trifling amusements like the theatre, painting, music, politics—the greatest nonsense of all—or with matters of trade. So who really thinks? Who, exactly? No one! Oh, pardon me . . . I'm getting carried away! I'll get back to the point."

"It was five years ago that I came here, monsieur. You don't know me, but I know you very well. . . . I never mingle with the crowds at your beach or your casino. I live on the cliffs. I positively adore the cliffs of Étretat. I know none more beautiful or healthier. I mean healthy in a spiritual sense. There's an excellent pathway between the sky and the sea, a verdant route that runs along the great wall of white rock, which takes you along the rim of the world, the rim of the land, above the Ocean. My best days are those I have spent stretched out on a grassy slope, in broad daylight, a hundred meters above the waves, dreaming. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, monsieur, perfectly."

"Now, would you be kind enough to let me ask you a question?"

"Ask, monsieur."

"Do you believe that the other planets are inhabited?"

"Certainly I believe it," I replied, without hesitation or any evident surprise.

He got up, moved by vehement joy and seized by a manifest desire to clasp me in his arms, then sat down again. "Oh, what luck!" he exclaimed. "What a blessing! I can breathe! But how could I ever have doubted you? A man would not be so intelligent if he did not believe the worlds inhabited. He would have to be a fool, a cretin, an idiot, a brute to suppose that the myriads of the universe shine and spin solely to amuse and astonish that imbecile insect man, to fail to understand that the Earth is nothing but an invisible mote in the dust of worlds . . . that our entire solar system is naught but a handful of molecules of sidereal life, which will perish soon enough."

"Look at the Milky Way, that river of stars, and realize that it is nothing but a smear on the expanse that is infinity. Only think about that for ten minutes and you will understand why we know nothing, we divine nothing, we understand nothing. We know only one place, nothing of anything beyond or outside it, of anywhere else—but we believe and we have faith. Oh! If it were suddenly revealed to us, the secret of the vast extent of extraterrestrial life, how astonished we would be!"

"But no . . . no . . . it's my turn to be stupid. We don't understand it, because our mentality is crafted to understand none but earthly things. It cannot extend much further; it is limited, like human life, trapped on this little globe that carries us, and it judges everything by that standard. So you see, monsieur, that the whole world is stupid, narrow-minded, and fully persuaded of the power of our intelligence, which scarcely surpasses that of animal instinct. We do not even have the capacity to perceive our infirmity; we are shaped to know the price of butter and corn, and—at the most—to haggle over the value of a couple of horses, a couple of boats, a couple of ministers or a couple of artists. That's all."

"We are just about fit for tilling the land and clumsily making use of that which lies upon it. Having only just begun to construct working machinery, we are childishly amazed by every discovery that we ought to have made centuries ago, had we been superior beings. We are still surrounded by the unknown, even at the moment when, after thousands of years of intelligent life, electricity has been discovered. Are you and I of the same opinion?"

"Yes, monsieur," I replied, laughing.

"Very well, then. Well, monsieur, do you ever pay any attention to Mars?"

"To Mars?"

"Yes, to the planet Mars?"

"No, monsieur."

"You know nothing at all about it?"

"No, monsieur."

"Will you permit me to tell you a little about it?"

"Yes, monsieur, with great pleasure."

"You know, presumably, that the worlds of our solar system, our little family, have been formed by the condensation into globes of rings of primal gas, detached one after the other from the solar nebula?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"It follows from this that the most distant planets are the oldest, and in consequence, must be the most civilized. This was the order of their birth: Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Earth, Venus, Mercury. Will you admit that these planets must be inhabited, like the Earth?"

"Certainly. Why suppose that the Earth is an exception?"

"Very well. The man of Mars will have a longer history than the man of Earth . . . but I'm going too quickly. First, I want to prove that Mars is inhabited. Mars presents to us something very similar to the aspect that Earth presents to Martian observers. The oceans there take up less space and are more widely scattered. They are identifiable by their dark hue, because water absorbs light, while the continents reflect it. Geographical modifications of the planetary surface are frequent, thus proving that its life is active. It has seasons like ours, snow at the poles that can be seen to grow and diminish with the passage of time. Its year is very long: six hundred and eighty-seven terrestrial days, which is six hundred and sixty-eight Martian days. That breaks down as follows: a hundred and ninety-one days of spring, a hundred and ninety-one of summer, a hundred and forty-nine of autumn and a hundred and forty-seven of winter. Fewer clouds are seen there than here; there must, in consequence, be greater extremes of cold and heat."

I interrupted him. "I beg your pardon, monsieur, but as Mars is much further from the sun than we are, it seems to me that it must always be colder there."

My bizarre visitor exclaimed very vehemently: "Wrong, monsieur! Wrong, totally wrong! We ourselves are more distant from the sun in summer than in winter. It is colder on the summit of Mont Blanc than at its foot. I refer you, moreover, to the mechanical theory of heat of Helmholtz and Schiaparelli. The heat of the sun is principally dependent upon the quantity of water vapor contained in the atmosphere. This is why: the absorbent capacity of a molecule of aqueous vapor is sixteen thousand times more than that of a molecule of dry air, so water vapor is our storehouse of heat. Mars, having fewer clouds, must be both much warmer and much colder than the Earth."

"I no longer contest the point."

"Very good. Now, monsieur, listen to me with the utmost attention, I beg you."

"I am all ears, monsieur."

"You have heard talk of the famous canals discovered in 1884 by Monsieur Schiaparelli?"

"Very little."

"Is that possible? Well then, in 1884, while Mars was in opposition to us, separated by a distance of no more than four million leagues, Monsieur Schiaparelli, one of the most eminent astronomers of the century and one of the most adept observers, suddenly discovered a large number of straight and broken black lines forming constant geometrical patterns, crossing the continents to link the seas of Mars! Yes, yes, monsieur: rectilinear canals, geometrical canals, of a similar width throughout their course, constructed by living beings! Yes, monsieur, the proof that Mars is inhabited, that there is life there, that there is intelligence there, that there is industry there . . . which can see us. Do you understand? Do you understand?"

"Twenty-six months later, at the time of the next opposition, these canals were visible again, monsieur, even more numerous—and they are gigantic, no less than a hundred kilometers wide."

I smiled at I replied: "A hundred kilometers wide! It must have required strong workers to dig them."

"Oh, monsieur, what are you trying to say? You do not know, then, that such labor is infinitely easier on Mars than on Earth, since the density of its material constructs is only sixty-nine per cent of ours. The intensity of its gravity is scarcely thirty-seven per cent of ours. A kilogram of water only weighs three hundred and seventy grams."

He threw these figures at me with such assurance, with the confidence of a businessman who knows the value of a number, that I could not prevent myself from breaking into laughter, and I was tempted to ask him how much sugar and butter weighed on Mars.

He shook his head.

"You are laughing, monsieur; instead of taking me for a madman, you take me for an imbecile—but the figures I have quoted you are those that you will find in every specialist textbook of astronomy. The diameter is nearly half as much less than ours; its surface area is only twenty-six per cent of ours; its volume is six and a half times smaller than that of the Earth and the velocity of its two satellites proves that its mass is ten times less. Now, monsieur, the intensity of gravity depends on the mass and the volume, which is to say on the mass and the distance of the surface from the center, so the inadmissible result is that on the planet there is a state of lightness that makes life completely different, regulating mechanical actions in a manner unknown to us, which must lead to a predominance there of winged species."

"Yes, monsieur, the Ruling Being of Mars has wings. He flies, passing from one continent to another like a spirit, all around his world, although he is unable to move beyond the vestiges of its atmosphere. . . ."

"To conclude, monsieur, can you imagine this planet, covered with plants, trees and animals whose forms we cannot even suspect, and inhabited by great winged beings like our artists' images of angels? Personally, I see them flying over the plains and cities, in the gilded atmosphere that they have there—for although it was believed in former times that the Martian sky is red while ours is blue, it is actually yellow: a beautiful, golden yellow."

"Are you still amazed that such creatures as those could hollow out canals a hundred kilometers wide! Then again, just think what science has achieved for us, in a single century . . . in a hundred years . . . and remind yourself that the inhabitants of Mars may well be far superior to us. . . ."

He fell abruptly silent, lowered his eyes, then murmured in a very low voice: "Now the time has come that you will take me for a madman . . . when I tell you that I have glimpsed them myself . . . the other night. You may or may not know that we are in the season of shooting stars. On the nights of the eighteenth and nineteenth, especially, they are seen every year in innumerable quantities; it is probable that we are passing at this very moment through the tail of a comet."

"I was, therefore, sitting on the Mane-Porte, that enormous sheer headland that juts into the sea, watching the rain of little worlds overhead. It's prettier and more entertaining than any artificial fire, monsieur. All at once, I perceived, directly above me, very close, a luminous transparent globe, surrounded by immense beating wings—

at least, I thought I saw wings in the semi-darkness of the night. It was fluttering like a wounded bird, turning on its axis with a loud, peculiar noise, seemingly breathless, dying, lost. It passed in front of me. One might have taken it for a monstrous crystal balloon, full of panicky-stricken creatures, scarcely discernible but excited, like the crew of a ship in distress, no longer under control but rolling from wave to wave. And the strange globe, having described an immense curve, came crashing down into the sea some distance away, where I heard it plunge into the depths with a noise like a cannon shot.

"Everyone for miles around heard that mighty impact, which they took for a thunderbolt. I alone have seen . . . I have seen . . . If it had fallen on to the shore beside me, I would have met the inhabitants of Mars."

"Don't say a word, monsieur. Think it over. Think it over for a long while . . . then tell the story, one day, if you wish. Yes, I have seen . . . I have seen . . . the first spaceship launched into the infinite by thinking beings . . . unless I have merely been present at the death of a shooting star captured by the Earth. For you may not know, monsieur, that the planets hunt the wandering worlds of space as we pursue vagabonds down here. The light and feeble Earth is only able to intercept the smallest of infinity's passers by."

He stood up, delirious with excitement, opening his arms wide to describe the march of the stars.

"The comets, monsieur, which roam the frontiers of the great nebula whose condensates we are; the comets, free and luminous herds, coming towards the sun from the depths of infinity. They come towards the radiant star, trailing their immense tails of light; they come, accelerating so forcefully in their bewilderment that they are unable to unite with their summer; after the merest brush with it, they are hurled back into space as rapidly as they fell. But if, in the course of their prodigious journeys, they pass close to a powerful planet, if they feel its attraction and are drawn from their route by its irresistible influence, they return then to their new master, which renders them captive henceforth. Their unlimited parabola is transformed into a closed curve, and it is thus that we can calculate the revisitations of periodic comets. Jupiter has eight slaves, Saturn one, Neptune one also, and its exterior planet one again, plus an army of shooting stars. . . . Then . . . Then . . . perhaps I only saw the Earth intercept a little wandering world . . ."

"Goodbye, monsieur, make no reply. Reflect, consider, and tell the whole story one day, if you wish. . . ."

That was all. The lunatic seemed to me less stupid than some mere man of independent means.

III. About the Text

The reference to Neptune in the final phase of the story is presumably an error; Maupassant probably meant to say Uranus, leaving Neptune—discovered in 1846—as the "exterior planet" mentioned immediately afterwards. (Pluto was not discovered until 1930.) This is, however, a trivial matter on which we need not dwell.

The most striking thing about "L'Homme de Mars," to the modern eye, is its resemblance to post-1947 descriptions of UFO encounters. The equipment of the luminous spherical ship with wings is an oddity, but an understandable one in the days when earthly flight was the prerogative of winged creatures and nondrinking balloons. The confusing movement of the object, and its frustrating disappearance, are typical of UFO sightings, as is the attempt to construe the unidentified object as an extraterrestrial spaceship, hence enabling some cosmic significance to be read into the experience. The deflationary hypothesis that what was seen might only have been a meteor would, however, very rarely be raised by the actual observer of a modern UFO, such skeptical suggestions almost always being left, nowadays, to avid debunkers. Nor would a modern UFO-seer be content to drop in on his friendly neighborhood *littérateur* (Maupassant lived at Étretat, where his mother retired after separating from his father, until 1871 and was a frequent visitor thereafter) to offer his story so tentatively; he would notify the local newspaper immediately, and insistently.

The politeness and delicacy of "L'Homme de Mars"—emphasized by the careful overuse of the term "monsieur"—does not, of course, work entirely to its advantage. Seen as a whole, the story is

insufficiently robust in its assertions even to qualify as a wholehearted exercise in science fiction, despite its generosity with physical data and mathematical calculations and its attempt to demonstrate by logical means that the inhabitants of Mars are likely to be winged as well as prodigious trench diggers. The reader is openly invited to consider the narrator's visitor a madman, and the best that the narrator can say for him is that he seems less stupid than you, average petty *rentier*.

The hypothetical Martians' resemblance to the angels of art is no coincidence, given the contention—drawn from the nebular hypothesis favored by such philosophers as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant—that the dominant race of Mars must have an older history than ours. This was a common assumption of the accounts of interplanetary tours published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although the descriptions of far-advanced civilizations were more likely to be located in the outer reaches of the solar system, while Venus—frequently imagined as a realm of unfallen creatures—was more likely to be host to quasi-angelic life-forms. As a Frenchman, Maupassant would have been likely to side with Benjamin Disraeli on the question of whether man—in the broadest and most essential sense—could better be imagined as an angel than an ape.

The reticence of the story extends much further, however, than the style of its dialogue and the quasi-angelic nature of its alternative Creation. The narrator is specifically instructed to offer no judgment as to the likelihood that the tale's teller really did see a spaceship from Mars, and he follows this instruction scrupulously, in spite of the careful ambivalence of his final remark. The initial description of the teller, which is not content to compare him to a schoolteacher but insists on emphasizing his assistant status, re-emphasizing his meager physique, also seems calculated to discredit him by implication—but the narrator does confirm, twice, that he and his visitor are of the same opinion as to the likelihood of other worlds being inhabited. The narrator is explicitly asked, twice over—the request itself being doubled on each occasion—to think carefully before publishing the story, and his decision to do so may therefore be reckoned more than a matter of telling an amusing anecdote. The fact that the narrator adds no elaborate commentary or judgmental coda to his account of the encounter is typical of Maupassant's innovative narrative method, and cannot be interpreted automatically as a sign of endorsement, but it is an eloquent silence nevertheless, which contrasts very sharply with the relative loquaciousness of "Le Horla."

"Le Horla" is very different from "L'Homme de Mars" in the matter of its formulation—so utterly different, in fact, that it might almost be regarded as an opposite. "Le Horla" is one of the finest examples of the "madman's manuscript" subgenre of horror fiction, which was very popular in the nineteenth century as a means of excusing fantastic intrusions into ostensibly naturalistic texts. The metaphysical speculations by which the diarist in the earlier story attempts to obtain an understanding of his imaginary tormentor are delivered directly rather than indirectly, but by virtue of that fact they become entirely subjective. Although the tale told in "L'Homme de Mars" is entirely a matter of hearsay, whose alleged source continually harps on about the inevitability of being mistaken for a madman, it nevertheless retains the appearance of reportage, and honest reportage at that.

The diarist of "Le Horla" is so successful in his attempt to invent an explanation of his unusual haunting that the exact extent of his delusion eventually becomes a matter of little significance by comparison with the forcefulness of his hypothesis as an allegory of the human condition. The story thus becomes a pioneering existentialist fantasy, offering a neatly detailed extrapolation of the *angoisse* that constitutes the dark underside of human consciousness. The hypothetical apparatus of "L'Homme de Mars" has a markedly different effect. To the extent that it is readable as an allegory, it is an account of conflicting forces in the human imagination and the nature of their opposition: the desire to imagine a better world, versus the suspicion that the force of that desire might pervert the perception of an event symbolic of death into something much finer.

No matter how strongly the reader may suspect that the narrator favors the antithesis rather than the thesis of this dialectical couplet, the question is left open, so that the reader can make up his own mind. Indeed, such is the formulation of the story that the visitor's appeals

for careful and generous consideration are directed to the reader as much as to the narrator. Unlike the modern UFO-seer, who is usually a propagandist for his own favored explanation of what he has seen, the puny assistant schoolmaster, whose clothes do not fit his skeletal frame, asks only that both sides of the question be examined—and that they be seen as two sides of a single question. Although he learned his art from Flaubert, who firmly believed that writers should withhold all moral judgment while describing circumstances as objectively as possible, Maupassant rarely treated his readers quite as generously as this; nor was he by any means alone in his tendency to load the narrative dice while ostentatiously refraining from explicit moral judgment.

It must be admitted that "L'Homme de Mars" is as much a *conte cruel* as it is a *conte philosophique*; the narrator, standing in for the syphilitic Maupassant—whose health was soon to deteriorate to the point at which he was no longer capable of literary creativity—would, understandably, have been tempted to interpret the story he had been told as an allegorical reflection of his own meteoric career, which blazed so brightly before its capture and destruction by a dark and irresistible gravity. The Parisian reader of 1887—even one who was reading the Christmas issue of a magazine, whose tone would be obliged by custom to assume his good mood—was probably tempted to read it in much the same way, his amusement tinged with derisive laughter. The option to read it differently was, however, there from the beginning; the modern reader is free to take it up without fear of being

guilty of misreading.

We, living in a postmodern era, would be perfectly free to ignore the narrator even if he were far less discreet, just as we would be free to ignore the recent pictures sent back by NASA's Mars Express even if they were not so unambiguously passé. The fact is, however, that "L'Homme de Mars" openly invites us to ignore the crabby narrator and come to our own conclusion about his visitor's poignantly crazy tale. We are perfectly entitled to cast our minds back, imaginatively, to an era long before we were born, when the canals of Mars might be reckoned more than an optical illusion and the gilded skies of the mysterious planet might indeed have been filled with thoughtful fliers. At the very least, we can see that as the preferable hypothesis, in terms of what it implies about the nature of the universe and the horizons of possibility. Perhaps Maupassant could see it too, even though he thought it advisable to leave the story to fall into dark obscurity rather than taking what steps he could to ensure its stellar permanence.

IV. A Note on the Text

The version of "L'Homme de Mars" from which I made my translation is the reprint in issue no. 2 (Février 2002) of *Le Bondard des Gorgones*, published by Philippe Gontier of *Les Aventuriers de l'Art Perdu*, 25 boulevard Albert Einstein, Impasse Jean Anouilh, 21000 Dijon, France. ►

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Mortal Engines by Philip Reeve

New York: HarperCollins/Eos, 2003; \$16.99 hc; 309 pages

reviewed by Walter Minkel

Mortal Engines was published in Britain as a children's book, but I hope that won't stop adult fans of British sci-fi from reading it. If you enjoyed Philip Pullman's *Hu Dark Materials* series or China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*, you'll enjoy this book. *Mortal Engines* is tough on its readers—not very often in a book marketed for children do not one, but two, of the good-guy viewpoint characters die. Neither are its villains totally bad. But enough British readers have found it gripping that it won one of the biggest children's book awards in the UK, the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize Gold Award and made the shortlist for another, the Whitbread Children's Book Award, in 2002.

It sounds pretty preposterous when you first sit down to read it. "It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring," it begins, "and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea." It's a post-apocalyptic novel, set long after the end of the Sixty-Minute War, which, between orbit-to-earth atomic weapons and bombs filled with tailored viruses, destroyed much of the world and killed most of its people. Reeve writes about a time in the far future when humanity possesses only a mongrel mixture of the "Old Tech," some of it far more advanced than tech of our current day, and some much older. A staff of archaeologists from the Guild of Historians keep looking for more of the Old Tech, and some of the most sought items are those weapons used in the Sixty-Minute War.

Throughout what used to be Europe roam cities on wheels. They prey on each other, with the larger cities scooping smaller ones into their undercarriages, and smaller cities forming alliances and attacking the larger cities from several directions at once. London is one of the few really big cities that has remained active and predatory, pursuing small towns and villages and incorporating their people and resources into their own. Londons call the process "Municipal Darwinism."

But now the number of smaller towns has shriveled to only a few, and the resources to keep the cities moving have shriveled away, too. Magnus Cromie, the Lord Mayor of London, has to find a way to keep the city running, and when Thaddeus Valentine, London's star archaeologist, finds the plans and formulae used to build MEDUSA, one of the Sixty-Minute War's most deadly weapons, Cromie's Guild of Engineers spare no effort to build it.

Tom Natsworthy, a lowly apprentice historian, almost wooshes Valentine, and MEDUSA is still a secret when a mysterious girl in a

mask attacks his hero. Tom helps rescue Valentine—and moments later, Valentine tries to kill him, throwing him and the mysterious girl from the city, leaving them both behind on the barren ground. Tom and the girl, whose name is Hester Shaw, form an awkward alliance. Hester was terribly scared when Valentine stole the MEDUSA plans from her mother—his former partner—and killed both her parents and thought he had killed Hester herself. Now, as a teenager, she is bent on one goal—killing Valentine to avenge her parents' death. Tom and Hester set out—first on foot, later in a variety of wheeled cities and airships—to return to London, so that Tom can get back home and Hester can wreak her revenge, not caring if she dies in the process.

In the meantime, in London, Valentine's teenage daughter Katherine, who is, because of her father, well-liked and respected in London society, bears the name MEDUSA and goes on her own journey to find out what it is. As she leaves London's higher levels and travels through the bowels of the wheeled city, she discovers that all is not well in the City of London. In fact, the city is in such desperate need of food that the Guild of Engineers has a program to reprocess human feces. Prisoners—many of them arrested for criticizing Magnus Cromie's policies—are wading, chest deep, in the oil to prepare it for its transformation into food. The prisoners themselves eat nothing but experimental food formulas, and so far they have all died of it.

Katherine allies with Pod, an apprentice engineer, and together they discover the truth about MEDUSA and plot to destroy it. And the four young viewpoint characters struggle to keep London from blasting down the huge wall that protects the fixed cities of Asia from the wheeled cities. And some of the results are indeed tragic; this novel's end is not a total triumph.

The line between who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, and what the right thing to do is, isn't as clear as most sci-fi novels make it. Until the end, you aren't quite certain what you want to happen. I recommend this book to any reader, adult or otherwise, who enjoys an action-packed story on a complex moral battlefield.

Eos has packaged this debut novel from British screenwriter Reeve as the first volume in "The Hungry City Chronicles," so it appears that we'll be seeing more of this bizarre future society. ►

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The Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith by Karen L. Hellekson

Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2001; \$32.00 tpb; 158 pages

reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In 1950, the pseudonym author of three not-very successful mainstream novels (and three others that even his publisher wouldn't take) had a short story published in an obscure science fiction magazine. One or two people noticed the story, but it didn't cause much of a stir. It would be another five years before a second science fiction story appeared from the same author. Nevertheless, in July 1951, presumably on the strength of that solitary and unpromising sale, he abruptly and rather brusquely severed his relationship with the agent who had thus far handled his mainstream fiction.

Today, that author, Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger ("Cordwainer Smith"), is recognized as one of the most distinctive and important voices in the science fiction of the last half-century, but looking back, his sudden move into science fiction seems extraordinary. Particularly as Karen Hellekson, whose book is based on meticulous trawling through Smith's archive at the University of Kansas, finds only a couple of attempts at science fiction stories in the manner of Edgar Rice Burroughs written (but not completed) some twenty years before "Scanners Live in Vain." What's more, Linebarger's profusion of pseudonyms—his earlier novels were published under the names Felix C. Forrest and Carmichael Smith, and he had toyed with a number of other various—seems to have been the result, largely, of embarrassment that those who knew him might discover he also wrote fiction. He was a highly respected academic at Johns Hopkins University, and in the 1950s writing science fiction would surely have been far more embarrassing for Professor Linebarger than writing tedious psychological novels.

What it seems appropriate to call the origin of the myth of Cordwainer Smith has a tremendous mystery at its core. Why did Smith turn so surprisingly and totally to the despised genre of science fiction? Was his future history already plotted at the time he wrote "Scanners Live in Vain," or was it an accidental accumulation as he wrote other stories about the instrumentality of mankind? Come to that, despite elaborate chronologies worked out by people like J. J. Pierce, was Smith's future history really as coherent as we are led to believe? His stories are filled with references to (and borrowings from) a world of literature, from Chinese legends to the poetry of Rimbaud, but how much did he know of science fiction? They are not the questions that Hellekson has asked. Hellekson's book, though it is the first book-length study of Smith to come from a single author (the only previous book was a collection of essays edited by John Bangsund which came out nearly thirty years ago and has long since been unobtainable), leaves all such questions unanswered. I wish she had.

The book, though apparently based upon Hellekson's master's thesis, reads like a conflation of essays each linked to its neighbors only by the accident of its subject, rather than a coherent argument developed over the book's sparse 104 pages of text (the rest consisting of a glossary, bibliographies, and index). Thus we get a brief biographical sketch that rehearses all the familiar points of Smith's life but adds little new to the mix. As ever, much is made of his experiences in China (where Madame Sun Yat-sen taught him French), but beyond a passing mention of "the Oriental storytelling techniques he uses" (5), there is little analysis of the impact this had upon his fiction. When, late in the book, Hellekson quotes Smith saying of his peripatetic childhood: "I learned early that the surface meaning of words was not their real meaning" (89), she uses this to make a point about his alienation, not his use of language, though it suggests that language and alienation were intimately linked.

Incidentally, Hellekson has been poorly served by her publisher; among a number of inefficiencies, some copy editor should surely have noticed that the second paragraph begins: "Cordwainer Smith" was really Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger, professor of Asiatic Studies at Johns Hopkins University (3), while paragraph six, just over the page, begins: "Cordwainer Smith was Paul Linebarger (1913-1966), a professor of Asiatic Politics at Johns Hopkins" (5).

We follow the biography with a chapter on his early non-sf novels, published and unpublished. In many ways, this is the most interesting

part of the book, because it deals with an area little known to the majority of us, though I have to say it left me with not the slightest interest in seeking out or, heaven forfend, reading those books. Hellekson doesn't say so in so many words, but they sound dire.

So far, so chronologically, but just when the story reaches the point where Smith emerges, apparently fully formed, as a science fiction writer, we jump to a chapter devoted to a detailed analysis of his relatively late story "Drunkboat" (1963) and of another story, "The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-All," which was rejected in 1955, revised but unpublished in 1958 and finally appeared in 1979, and which is an early version of "Drunkboat." As a line-by-line analysis of the evolution of a story, this is fascinating—there's some particularly interesting stuff on how much Smith lifted wholesale from Rimbaud's poem "Le Bateau Ivre"—but as part of a broad survey of a writer's work it seems out of place, particularly here where we want to hear about "Scanners Live in Vain" and its immediate successors. Two chapters later, Hellekson pulls much the same trick with a study of Smith's one science fiction novel, *Nanarrin*, and of the various early drafts (under the rather gauche title "Star Craving Mad") found in his archive. Taken together with the portion of the second chapter devoted to his unpublished novels, it can seem as if more of this book is devoted to what did not see print than to what did.

It is, in fact, only in the last chapter that she returns to the beginning of Smith's sf career with "Scanners Live in Vain." There is some background information. She quotes J. J. Pierce: "Evidence is strong that the entire background of 'Scanners' was worked out in the six months from January to July 1945" (86), though we don't learn what this evidence might be. This is tantalizing—herein might be the moment of Smith's Pauline conversion—but Hellekson seems to assume that because Smith did turn to science fiction it was always inevitable that he would and so does not go down that route. We know that the story was completed in the summer of 1945 and rejected by every major sf market over the next three years before it was bought by the obscure *Fantasy Book* in 1948, which held on to it for two further years before publishing it. Given that Smith's second sf story, "The Game of Rat and Dragon," was sold in 1955, there appears to be a ten-year gap between these first two stories. Yet we pass over this curious decade in silence.

What we do get is a critical examination of certain recurring themes in Smith's work, usually based on just one or two examples. Smith was not the most prolific of writers; in a science fiction career that lasted just over ten years he produced one novel and fewer than 30 stories (including a couple that have been published posthumously), but only half a dozen of those works warrant more than a passing mention in this study. This can lead to a slightly wayward impression. In an otherwise excellent analysis of the social and spiritual role of the Underpeople in his work (based largely on "The Ballad of Lost C'Mell" and "The Dead Lady of Clown Town"), she points out that these generically modified creatures were originally slaves. But she fails to mention the "habermans" in "Scanners Live in Vain," whose existence suggests that slavery was endemic in Smith's view of the future. She asserts, interestingly, that the closer to human appearance a person is, the more human they are in his view. Thus the two races of human stock, the truenoms who have achieved an artificial physical perfection and the hominids who have been changed to suit different physical conditions, are less human than the animal-based underpeople who have been changed to appear like people. But she doesn't pursue the notion, perhaps because it might sit uneasily with our vigorously defended image of Smith as a liberal on racial and social issues.

Hellekson is very protective of Smith; while not exactly a hagiography, this book is not exactly a critique either. In a study of Smith's use of the idea of the Pain of Space—which again seems like a fruitful critical approach to his work—she goes through curious contortions to assert that, in "Scanners Live in Vain," "Marrel's alienation from humanity and from the other scanners provides him with empathy" (93). It is as if an alienated hero is too cold an avatar

of the author for her, but as many of her quotations from Smith's letters and her descriptions of his behavior inadvertently show, alienation seems a significant key to both the man and his work.

These are not necessarily humane stories. Though he makes a big thing of the importance of love, and there is an overt religious aspect to so many of his stories, it is also evident that Smith's stories are full of techniques that distance him (and us) from people. These range from his typical story structure—although set in the distant future, they are legends of an ancient past in which characters are mostly fulfilling some legendary role—to the self-evident fact that his stories are littered with animals being preferred over humans. The role of people, meanwhile, both in his mainstream novels and in his science fiction, appears to be to suffer pain, psychic and physical. For all his eminence, Lindegarer seems to have been an isolated and discontented man. How valid an approach to Cordwainer Smith's work this might be, I cannot say. Certainly there are hints scattered through Hellekson's book to suggest this as a possible angle, but it is

not the approach that Hellekson takes.

The first two chapters set up expectations for a broader and more systematic examination of Cordwainer Smith's life and work, though if her book had been expanded to a reasonable length, perhaps twice the size of the one we have in front of us now, then she might have had room to do just the job that is so clearly needed. What she does do, particularly in the last four chapters of this book, is consider four fruitful aspects of Smith's work that repay critical examination: his range of literary influences, the role of the underpeople, the *Bildungsroman* of *Norsefire*, and the psychological importance of pain. In each case they feel like starting points rather than the last word, and I hope that other critics might explore further and more widely along the avenues she has pointed out. Nevertheless, that must not take away from the value and the quality of what she has done in these four semi-independent essays. ▶

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War for the Oaks by Emma Bull

New York: Orb Books, 2001; \$13.95 tpb; 320 pages

reviewed by Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

... the critic should not be the prosecutor of a book but its defender, though one not allowed to lie: he may only present the work in the most favorable light.

—Stanislaw Lem

But what, then, is the reviewer to do when it appears to him that a popular, highly praised, even beloved book has a hole at its heart? Particularly when said critic likes the book enough that he wishes he could like it more?

It's easy to cast Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* in a favorable light. It's an amiable and entertaining book, with a memorable and likeable protagonist, Eddi McCandry, a talented but struggling musician, is down but never out as the story begins. Eddi and her best friend, Carla (an equally engaging character), quit a band that was going nowhere—and now what?

"Now what" is the intrusion of *Faerie* into her life. Eddi has been chosen as the mortal participant in a *Faerie* war—a war of the Seelie and the Unseelie courts. A mortal, apparently, is required to make the war valid, to make it possible for the combatants to kill and die. The battles and maneuvers in the war follow the story's internal logic perfectly and lead to a climax that is exciting and undeniably right.

But wait, there's more: Bull brings the Minneapolis/St. Paul area and its musical culture to life in precisely the way the roughly contemporary rock movie *Purple Rain* failed to do. Mind you, I've never been to Minnesota, and for all I know Prince may have portrayed the area more accurately. Prince never made it real, though; he never gave it the feeling of a living place.

And if that isn't enough, there's a perfectly lovely romance between Eddi and Willy Silver, a guitarist whom the reader recognizes immediately as a noble of the Seelie, even if Eddi doesn't. (This is the only point in the novel where the reader may think that maybe she isn't that bright.)

Amiable. Entertaining. So... what's not to like? What else do you want from a fantasy novel? What flaw could be so vital in a novel with so many strengths?

I'm going to make two attempts to answer this question, but please understand that they are the same answer. I'll try to connect the two, but there comes a point beyond which theory can't carry us, and silence takes over. If I can't make the connection clear, you'll think that I've described two flaws in *War for the Oaks*, when the truth is that I'm describing one minor but vital flaw from two angles.

The first approach is stylistic. Bull begins with a prologue of especial scenic intensity:

[L]ate at night, there's a change in the Nicollet Mall.

The street lamp globes hang like myriad moons, and light glows in the empty bus shelters like nebulae. Down through the silent business district the mall twists, the silver

zipper in a patchwork coat of many dark colors. The sound of traffic from Hennepin Avenue, one block over, might be the grating of the World-Worm's scales over stone.

Near the south end of the mall, in front of Orchestra Hall, Peavey Plaza beckons: a reflecting pool, and a cascade that descends from towering chrome cylinders to a sunken walk-in maze of stone blocks and pillars for which "fountains" is an inadequate name. In the moonlight, it is black and silver, gray and white, full of an elusive play of shape and contrast.

On that night there were voices in Peavey Plaza... (14)

In such a setting, the reader is not even slightly surprised when the "voices" turn out to be a pair of faeries. Bull's description of the real-world Minneapolis/St. Paul and environs only rarely reaches this level of intensity and alienation, but it remains intense and accurate throughout. We see her cities as places where faeries might war.

But when it comes to describing the people, places, and things of *Faerie*, there is a strange failure of imagination, a lapse into vagueness and cliché and inadequacy to the subject. Consider this description of a suit of armor:

It was not the metal plate of Hollywood knights; this was both simpler in its lines and more complex in its construction. It was an impossibly harmonious collection of Japanese samurai garb, biker's leathers, and costumeing for a science fiction movie. There was golden metal mesh so fine it might have been cloth; shining quilted leather, dyed dark green; and solid plates over the shoulders, torso, and lower legs that looked and sounded like brilliantly lacquered wood. The head was covered by a lacquered helmet that suggested what might have been an animal's face. She couldn't be sure; it was not an animal she'd ever seen. Eddi saw no sign of wear on the armor. (149)

I defy any two people, without consulting, to draw pictures of this armor that look vaguely similar. When she comes to describe the fantastic, Bull gives us random specific bits and pieces with too little sense of how they fit together. The only way in which this description is more annoying than dozens of others is in its insistence that the armor is "harmonious," without offering any help in harmonizing the discordant parts.

That's one way of looking at the flaw: a descriptive failure.

The other approach is less textual and more generic.

One of the basic questions facing the fantasist is the approach to the fantastic. Classically, there are three methods of introducing the fantastic into a work, each with innumerable variations. Farah Mendleson classifies them as Portal, Immersive, and Intrusive fantasies. Each of these is traditionally associated with a kind of

thematic, the way in which they generate meaning about (or at least relevant to) the reader's "real" world. For simple exposition, we can associate them with the three fantasists who were members of the Inklings, and call them the Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams methods, though none of the three limited himself to a single form.

Portal fantasy is C. S. Lewis's usual method and is commonly found in children's fantasies. A portal fantasy takes a character or characters from our world and transports them into the realm of the fantastic—for example, Lewis's famous Wardrobe is a portal that brings Lucy and her siblings to Narnia. Almost inevitably, such a work becomes a quest of self-discovery; whatever adventures are had along the way lead the "real-world" protagonist to face some truth about herself and either to accept that truth, or change herself, or both.

Immersive fantasy, the method favored by J. R. R. Tolkien, is the method usually used in both high fantasy and sword-and-sorcery. Simply assume the fantastic world and set your adventures in it, explaining what you must, as you can. Because it has no clear connection with the real world, the high-fantasy mode is thematically the freest of the three; most usually the story is a Tale for its own sake, and the reader is left to generate any meaning for herself.

Charles Williams's method, used in seven of his novels, is the intrusive fantasy. The method of intrusive fantasy is precisely that of Williams, of the typical *Unknown* writer, and of Thorpe Smith: The fantastic intrudes into the mundane, and we follow its effect on the life of a cast of mundane characters, chosen to give an interesting range of reactions. This is also the method of urban fantasies such as *War for the Oaks*. The meaning is, generally, generated by an end-of-the-story revelation about the nature of the world in which the characters—and, since this is all supposed to have taken place in the real world, we—live. This is what makes intrusive fantasy so apt to the hand of religious fantasists like Williams; they are explicitly making claims about the nature of reality.

But it is precisely here that *War for the Oaks* fails. There is no such revelation. There is a moment in the final battle—of the hands—in which something happens that could be revelatory, but it isn't. Nor does the fantastic reveal anything to or about Eddi McCandry; rather, her extraordinary daily life is itself a wonderful revelation, against which all the fantastic elements seem almost an irrelevant intrusion.

The point here, the point of both these ways of perceiving the deep-level failure of *War for the Oaks*, is that Bull has made the realistic elements of her novel stronger, more attractive, more interesting, and far more vivid than the fantastic elements. In the company of the real, the fantastic elements fade to a pale gray—white, a corpse-like hue; they never quite live. Even Willy Silver, easily the best-developed of the Faerie characters, is revealed as a limited and rather mechanical set of motivations and responses next to Eddi and Carla. We are left to wonder why she bothered to write a fantasy novel at all, when she had at hand the material for a truly superior mainstream novel.

It would be easy to relate this to the type of failure Ursula K. Le Guin describes in "From Elfhelm to Poughkeepsie," but that is precisely not the point. The fantastic elements are genuinely fantastic. The Faerie folk speak, if not quite as one might expect, in recognizable tongues of Faerie, clearly distinct from the speech of Eddi McCandry's Upper U.S.A. And there is a clear difference, shown and not told, between the evil Unseelie and the—well, not-evil—Seelie. They're both manipulative, but the Seelie aren't cruel for cruelty's sake.

In the end, *War for the Oaks* is (as I said above) an amiable and entertaining book, and yet it appears to have garnered a reputation and a following far beyond the deserts of amiability and entertainment, winning the *Loeb* award for best first novel and a finalist nod for the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award. Ten years after its original 1987 publication, it was out of print—badly out of print, with beat-up copies fetching appalling prices—but one would not have had to look hard or far to hear about it. More than one fan in the late '90s would refer to it as "the best fantasy book I have ever read," or even their favorite book of any sort, the number one desert island book. (A glance at the customer reviews on Amazon.com will confirm this.)

Why?

Probably the best explanation is given by Cheryl Morgan in her e-zine, *Enchanted City*: "Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* bears roughly the same relation to urban fantasy that *Neuromancer* does to cyberpunk." This is true, indeed, it is truer than I suspect Morgan intended it to be.

Because, of course, *War for the Oaks* is no more the first work, or even the first major work, in urban fantasy than *Neuromancer* is in cyberpunk. Indeed, urban fantasy goes back much farther than cyberpunk. I have already mentioned Charles Williams and Thorpe Smith; perhaps it would be wise to mention also certain works of Ray Bradbury and even H. G. Wells—for example, "The Small Assassin" and "The Man Who Could Work Miracles," respectively. Even the modern "movement" in urban fantasy was well under way when Bull's novel first appeared. Charles de Lint, for example, had published a half-dozen books by then. Yet this one seems to have captured a lot of hearts.

Again: Why?

For one thing, it isn't just a fantasy novel. You have to look a little harder, but there's the shape of a romance novel in there too, in the relationship between Eddi and Willy Silver, which is based to a certain extent on his limitations as a character: He just plain does not understand this mortal "love" thing. There is a small but significant crossover readership from the romance readership, more importantly, readers who are fans of both romance and fantasy seem to find the combination irresistible.

For another, there's the music. In the introduction to *Huntsucker*, William Gibson says of John Shirley that, in his writing, you can "hear the guitars." Similarly, the Minneapolis music scene in *War for the Oaks* isn't just color, it's alive, it's real, and it's deeply embedded in the prose. This is clearly the work of someone who doesn't just know music, she feels it. Patrick Nielsen Hayden once wrote in a Usenet posting:

Emma Bull does get the music stuff right. I don't just mean the way musicians talk, I mean the processes by which they do their work, singly and together. In an sf-and-fantasy field full of gratingly false portrayals of this stuff, *War for the Oaks* stands out.

Granted, the music scene Bull describes was a bit obscure even in its time, and is now both obscure and dated. But the details of that scene are inarguable, and it lends *War for the Oaks* the same sort of authority-of-reality that Bull's vivid portrayal of Minneapolis/St. Paul does. It doesn't hurt that the songs Eddi writes and sings were written by a real songwriter and not a novelist pretending to be one.

And, perhaps most importantly, it seems to have found the right audience at the right time. *Neuromancer* was a success at least in part because of excellent timing and product placement: It was the Big Book of Terry Carr's revived Ace Science Fiction Specials series. *War for the Oaks* occupied a similar place in Fern Windling's shorter-lived Ace Fantasy Specials. Furthermore, both books were written in a way that combined a Stephen King-ish brand-name *zeitgeist* consciousness with a hipper-than-thou underground sensibility that never got quite so hip as to make itself difficult for the un-hip. Both Gibson and Bull are actually better writers, at least at the level of prose, than King, and both are masters of the startlingly appropriate image (the "eyeball hack"), from Gibson's sky "the color of a television tuned to a dead channel" to Bull's river that "glittered like wrinkled black patent leather."

Even if it isn't the absolute acme of urban fantasy, *War for the Oaks* is an excellent evening's entertainment. Flawed as it is, I was glad to read it in 1987, and glad to have encountered it a decade-and-a-half later.

Orb has provided the new edition with a marvelous, moody cover. Bull has chipped in an introduction (of sorts) and a preface containing some scenes from a proposed screenplay of the novel, scenes not in the book but that might play well on screen. They add, I think, nothing to the book—such things rarely do—but they're fun in themselves.

If you haven't read it, do. Unless you've not got a sentimental bone in your body, you'll be glad you did. ►

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Hideos Beauties by Lance Olsen, images by Andi Olsen

Portland, Oregon: Eraserhead Press, 2003; \$13.95 tpb, 203 pages

reviewed by Tanine Allison

Long have visual artists plundered the fertile soil of sf for imaginative ideas. While some have provided straight illustrations of sf stories, others have used the speculative themes of sf to fuel equally out-of-the-ordinary art. Lance Olsen's latest short story collection, *Hideos Beauties*, demonstrates this symbiotic relationship between art and fiction, image and text. Ten of the fictions in this volume take inspiration from bizarre artwork, from Max Ernst's famous collage "Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale" to John William Waterhouse's fantasy portrait of "The Lady of Shalott" to Edward Kienholz's eerie "The State Hospital." Like the art inspired by sf, some of the stories provide a narrative background to the image, while others riff off the theme of the artwork to create another story entirely. Interestingly, *Hideos Beauties* does not reproduce the images that prompted the stories. Some may be familiar to readers, but many are obscure. Although the fictions do stand alone, I would recommend taking a look at the artworks, which are available (along with other things, like a forum and a fascinating set of links) on Olsen's website <www.cafecreigist.com>.

Hideos Beauties takes the visual-verbal relationship one step further: The opening and closing pieces in the collection are image-text collages, collaborations between Olsen and his wife, the artist Andi Olsen. Lance and Andi Olsen have joined forces to create such work-art before, most notably in the 2000 short story collection *Severing Shut My Eyes*. In that volume, the images and words are cut up and thrown together, creating monstrous chimeras of body parts, animals, and electronics; people with TV heads; and quotations, definitions, bits of narrative exploded on the page in bold typefaces. In comparison to these harsh statements about (post)modern life, the ethereal images in *Hideos Beauties* seem like they might float off the page. Of course, they still depict some odd, disturbing juxtapositions: a decapitated head lying serenely on a white beach, a contorted angel hanging from a noose, a viny head coughing roses, a woman's face trapped on a TV trapped in a cage. The images breathe a sense of the divine while, at the same time, seeming grotesque and unnatural. This confluence between the gorgeous and the perverse reminded me of Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, a beautifully shot, yet horrifying avant-garde film composed solely of dead bodies being cut open and autopsied. Lance and Andi Olsen also demonstrate this paradox of beauty and hideousness.

Lance Olsen is probably best known for what he calls his anti-literary: *Tenuring the Zeitgeist* (finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award), *Time Famine*, and *Frankness*. Set in the same future world, these three novels take cyberpunk to the extreme, with incredibly rich detail in a fast-paced, convoluted race to the end. "Head-trip" would not be a bad description. Olsen publishes short fiction prolifically in alternative magazines and webzines, and *Hideos Beauties* is his third published volume of short stories. Olsen is a champion of the independent press. After his first novel *Life From Earth* was published by Ballantine, all of his subsequent work has been published by alternative presses like Permeable and Fiction Collection Two. *Hideos Beauties* comes from Eraserhead Press, which specializes—or so an advertisement claims—in a new genre aptly named Bizarre, which "brings together the neo-surrealists, the post-postmodernists, the literary punks, the magical realists, the masters of grotesque fantasy, the bastards of offbeat horror, and all other rebels of the written word." With all this literary rebellion, it may be hard to believe that until recently Olsen lived in the academic world, as a professor of literature and creative writing at the University of Idaho. He has published a number of nonfiction studies, including *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy* and *William Gibson: A Reader's Guide*, as well as a fiction-writing textbook called *Rebel Yell*.

Olsen is associated with the avant-pop (A&P) movement, which conceives of itself as a post-cyberpunk, post-postmodern engagement with the media landscape, drawing inspiration from such figures as Pynchon, Warhol, Dick, Acker, Cronenberg, and Gibson. Olsen's website describes it thus: "the A&P is a multi-media

mode of expression that splices the avant-garde's obsession with innovation, experimentation, and radicalization with a deep pop sensibility. The result: an extreme postmodern fusion and confusion of the traditional distinctions between 'high' culture and 'low.'" In *Hideos Beauties*, Olsen is less concerned with media and more interested in mediation, in both the construction of a story and in the experience of the self. Olsen's stories explore the theme of the in-between: the intersection of image and language, the transition between life and death, the sensation of suspended time. The effect is less the wild ride of cyberpunk than the ephemeral bewilderment of surrealism or magical realism.

One theme that runs throughout the volume is the deformed or fragmented body, which serves as a metaphor for both modern consciousness and the monstrosity of text. Unlike sf's more civilized or contained forms of corporeal modification or cyborgization, Olsen is obsessed with the freakish and violent themes of bodily abnormality and fragmentation. The last image-text collage, also titled "Hideos Beauties," takes images from Andi Olsen's art project *Freemove* and provides mini-narratives about each of the freaks. They include the Disappearing Girl, the Abyssian Mermaid, the Human Answering Machine, the Incredible Coughing Man, the Astounding Conjoined Twins, and the Sibylline Head. The piece commences with a quotation from Ed McClanahan: "Freaks are just like us, only more so."

The story "Sixteen Jackies," prompted by Andy Warhol's piece of the same name depicting sixteen silkscreened images of Jackie Kennedy, imagines that after JFK's death, Jackie has an out-of-body experience and witnesses herself splitting into multiple selves. These Jackies then go on to live different lives, while the narrator-Jackie gets fat and lives in seclusion in New York City, reading about the others in the tabloids. The out-of-body experience figures in a few of the stories, demonstrating the multiplicity and incoherence of one's identity. The fragmentation of the self is taken literally in "The Doll, or What the Dead Think About at the Very End of the World," based on Hans Bellmer's picture of an incomplete but coy-looking mannequin-woman, in which two lovers bored with their kinky sex routine seek bliss in the mutilation of their bodies.

Similarly, "Interrupted Reading" takes inspiration from an image by Joel-Peter Witkin, depicting a deformed and fragmented woman in a dress (the top of her head is missing, her detached arm is propped up next to her, her exposed breasts have no nipples) whose finger holds a place in her book. The joke, if you can call it that, is that her reading was interrupted by the deterioration of her body. Olsen's story describes a belligerent hunchback dwarf stalking a suburban neighborhood demanding Halloween candy. It is at the same time a meta-story about beginnings and ends and a recitation of the elements that make up a story. If text is everything and everything is text—one of the tenets of postmodernism—then the fragmentation or deformity of the text is that of the body, and vice versa. Olsen attempts to demonstrate the futility of making a distinction between the body of text and the textual body.

The fictions in *Hideos Beauties* are experimental in form as well as content. Beyond the image-text experiments, a few stories do without punctuation (one uses ellipses), a couple rearrange text on the page, and some segment the text into sections with numbers or subheadings. The story inspired by Da Vinci's "Sketch of a Flying Machine" alternates between Da Vinci's instructions for the machine, supposed excerpts from his notebooks reproduced in his backward writing, and a story about his failed growth of wings and final rocket flight. The stories don't follow traditional narrative trajectories; many don't have endings per se. Instead, like the paintings or artworks these stories riff on, they present just a piece of the action, a sliver of experience, one eternal moment. Unlike some of his other work, where characters and ideas run across the page in an orgy of cyberpunk action, Olsen here takes a more measured, uncertain tone. Narrators, constantly questioning the details of their own stories, can't quite remember names, dates, or places. The story is invariably interrupted

by digressions and caveats, bringing our attention to the construction of the story, rather than merely absorbing us in plot. This serves a critical function, denaturalizing traditional literary formats and exposing the work that goes into a narrative.

Reading *Hideous Beauties*, I was both drawn into the story world and pushed out, an effect probably not unintended by its author. While I found that some of the more straightforward narrative swept me up in its untraditional progression of time, I was left confused or unengaged with some of its experimental style. At its best, Olsen's fiction resounds with an overwhelming sense of magical, if horrific, possibility found in the best of what, whatever form it may take. On the other hand, despite his radical experimentation with form, his writing style in this volume can be repetitive and sound rehearsed. When specific phrases or ideas popped up in more than one story, I began to feel that his halting, uncertain tone was merely a comment on the crisis of memory or knowledge, rather than an organic outgrowth of the story's subject matter. Here's a typical caveat narrated, we assume, by the Lady of Shalott:

(at least this is what I have heard tell concerning certain fish bellies . . . what I believe I have heard tell . . . though it is equally feasible that I have never heard tell a thing about certain fish bellies, have simply imagined such tellings . . . but, be that as it may . . .)

Now, imagine this sort of interruption over and over again. While these textual disruptions certainly reflect the difficulties of speaking across boundaries—for instance, speaking about one's life from some existential plane after death—I found that in some stories they distracted from the engaging sense of wonder or horror that Olsen has mastered. This volume's greatest accomplishment is Olsen's remarkable

ability to capture that sense of in-betweenness, of suspended time, a blurring of the internal and external worlds: the moments between death and life, a child's fantastic belief that kissing frogs will get her a prince, an out-of-body experience, the surreality of a moment of trauma. One story describes this sensation as

a being neither here nor there not unlike I suppose the condition one sometimes inhabits immediately after one has drifted into the still lacy grayish veils of sleep while somehow believing one is still awake.

Olsen is invested in deconstructing the dichotomies of ugliness/beauty, attraction/repulsion, image/language. These fictions take place in the interstices between the two opposite poles, as he puts it, romantically, "where image and language kiss." Angels, themselves intermediary figures between Heaven and Earth, figure prominently in the book, from the hanged angel of the first story-collage to the "Wounded Angel" in Hugo Simberg's painting to the Angel's Kiss, the ultimate pleasure-pain experience by the two lovers eliminating limbs.

Furthermore, Olsen reminds us that innovation in sf is not limited to dreaming up new gadgets or alien worlds. Some of its most remarkable inventions have been psychological. SF's conventional settings, devices, and plots allow for an intensified exploration of our experience of time, identity, and perception. Olsen has eschewed these conventions and focused, with great success, on expressing the inexpressible—that mix of pleasure and pain, the uncertainty of self, the ephemerality of a brief moment, reality as surreality—that nonetheless exist around us in everyday life. ▶

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In Springdale Town by Robert Freeman Wexler
Harrogate, UK: PS Publishing, 2003; £8.00 tpb; viii + 86 pages
reviewed by Russell Blackford

This is a beautifully produced book from a small publisher that has earned a great deal of respect from highly regarded professionals in the sf/fantasy field. PS Publishing's list includes stand alone novellas by such writers as China Miéville, Stephen Baxter, Michael Moorcock, and Paul J. McAuley, with introductions by various other luminaries, including Robert Silverberg, Michael Swanwick, and Greg Bear. There are also anthologies and collections by similarly established writers. I'm puzzled how a small press can attract this kind of talent to a list that seems to have very restricted print runs, which presumably cannot support substantial advances or royalties.

This probably says something about the generosity of sf and fantasy writers, the field's sense of family, the publisher's production values, and the attraction of being able to publish work that could not otherwise find a ready market. Novella length is esthetically ideal for science fiction and some kinds of fantasy. It enables a writer to produce work that is long enough for developed ideas and characters but short enough to write a focused narrative with no distractions, complications, and gratuitous scenes. Yet, as we all know, it is the most difficult length to sell to commercial markets.

Whatever the reasons for its success in attracting good writing, PS Publishing is doing something very commendable.

This particular volume is a novella by a writer whose work I did not know, Robert Freeman Wexler, introduced by one whose work I know well, Lucius Shepard. As happens so often, the introduction is a disappointment. Shepard spends most of his allocated pages apologizing for not recognizing Wexler's potential when the latter was a student at the Clarion West Writer's Workshop in 1997. Shepard states that talent was never the issue, but he gained an impression when teaching at the workshop that Wexler's literary sensibility did not lend itself to a career in science fiction, and he doubted whether Wexler had the drive to succeed in the commercial marketplace. His rueful recantation of those impressions is fair enough, but I'm afraid this is not kind of thing I am interested in reading about.

To be fair to Shepard, though, it was generous of him to give his time to support Wexler and PS Publishing in this way, and I realize that this kind of endorsement of a new writer is commercially useful. The introduction does contain a couple of interesting paragraphs toward the end, in which Shepard actually gives his impression of the narrative that we are about to read. Still, even a few sentences about Wexler's more general ambitions, thematic concerns, and place within the younger cohort of science-fiction and fantasy writers would have helped me.

The narrative itself is a quiet, engaging, sometimes fascinating piece with alternating chapters told from different viewpoints. Some are narrated in the third person, through the eyes of a small-time Hollywood actor called Richard Shelling, one of whose roles was that of a character called Patrick Travis. The other chapters are in first-person narration by a lesser called . . . Patrick Travis, actually . . . who ultimately meets Shelling in, yes, Springdale town.

As an extra comic treat, small points in the narrative are glossed by means of humorous sidenotes, perhaps the best being the one that includes a map of the USA by body weight. This "map" is really an amusing graph that purports to plot longitude against (averaged) weight, creating a shape that tapers at Los Angeles and New York, where, so we are informed, many salads are eaten. In fact, the shape resembles some kind of beaked and blubbery aquatic mammal, tapered at both ends and bulky in the middle. The clear, rational voice of the sidenotes seems comic, and heightens the comic effect of the rest of the narrative, which is also admirably, if often surreally, clear.

Shelling is a lonely, wistful soul who gets in his car on impulse and drives all the way across America before settling into Springdale. He is full of angst. He is gentle to a fault, the kind of man who worries about disturbing the animals on his new farm. By contrast, Travis is much more aggressive in manner, and many of his reactions are bitter. He returns to the town where he once practiced law for three years in order to attend a wedding. Travis is, in all, a pretty tough guy who believes "I know how to handle myself pretty well, no matter what the circumstances." Throughout the novella, both characters have to cope

with loneliness, though this is more self-inflicted in the case of Travis, who is rather masochistic and positively desires time alone. Much of his energy goes into avoiding old acquaintances and reminders of unhappy memories.

Events reach a point of surreality—become truly weird, as Shepard would put it—about two thirds of the way through, when Shelling is mysteriously imprisoned and subdued by some of the town's odder people. For his part, Travis is guided through a strange building, through rooms and passages, down a ladder—and even has to swim through a kind of breathable, oxygenated jelly. For the characters and the reader, the events become inexplicable, absurd.

It seems that Travis and Shelling are, in some sense, versions of the same person, and they cannot be allowed to coexist in the same reality.

All of this is amusing, and the quality of the prose makes the narrative enjoyable reading, though it feels unresolved, at least for me. The last few pages are more expressive and clever than actually coherent, and I had no sense that events had to turn out the way they did.

Never mind. Although I found *In Springdale Town* puzzling, even frustrating, it is entertaining, and well worth a look. Wexler could, indeed, have a successful career ahead, and judged from this one example, we should keep an eye on him. Meanwhile, PS Publishing deserves applause and support, not only for this book but for its overall program of publications. ▶

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Omniflix by Scott Mackay

New York: Roc Books, 2004; \$6.99 pb; 408 pages

reviewed by David Mead

Scott Mackay writes sf and mystery stories in about equal measure. His mysteries include the novels *Dark Comfort*, *Fall Guy*, and *Old Scores*, while his sci-fis are *Outpost* (1998), *The Meek* (2001), *Orbis* (2002), and now *Omniflix*. *Outpost* was reviewed in NYSF in February 1999, and *The Meek* in November 2001. Like *The Meek*, this book frames a struggle between authoritarian government and an oppressed minority, and like that earlier work, *Omniflix* tries to pack a lot of story into a too-small package.

In the mid-twenty-fifth century, Earth has been devastated by a terrible and mysterious attack by an alien armada armed with horrific nanotech weapons designed to kill off or genetically transform humanity. Some ten years later, despite having fought off the invasion and learned much from captured alien technology, the Earth remains a shambles, reduced to a small handful of allied nation-states, continental corporations, and island confederacies. The survivors in the Defederacy—a loose alliance of small enclaves once a part of the United States of America—are struggling to cope with a ruined economy, the ongoing threat of infection by the alien nanogens, and the medical and social needs of a huge population of persons infected with two particular types of nanogens. The "number 16s" are young persons who suffer an induced accelerated senescence; they all die by age 30. Those infected by nanogen-17 suffer massive cellular death, which humanity has learned to counter with a cybernetic system known as Omniflix, which turns the human into a cyborg soldier. Uninfected humanity is terrified by both types, who are either cast out into the surrounding wastelands or ghettoized and legally oppressed. Complicating the political situation on Earth is an ongoing war with the inhabitants of Mars, who are also attempting to master, or at least exploit, the strange biotechnology taken from the alien invaders.

Dr. Alex Demyer is a research scientist, the foremost expert on the alien's nanotech in the Defederacy of Delaware. Just as his cousin, the CEO of Delaware, announces what may be a new attack by the aliens, Alex is suddenly fired from his position with his nation's Information Systems Service, where he disarms alien weapons systems as well as studying the alien's nanotechnology. It is bewildering. At this moment of planetary crisis, CEO Graham Croft orders his dismissal and then interferes with his attempts to find other work in science—apparently because Alex is suspected of disloyalty. Exonerated, Alex is sent to study the gigantic Alien Weapons Platform that has entered the Solar System. He manages to change the AWP's orbit, saving Earth from what may be another terrible attack, but in the process he is infected with nanogen-17. He returns to Earth in time to be saved from death by treatment with Omniflix.

Partially reconstituted with cybernetic parts, he is sent by his cousin to spy on the other Number 17s of Delaware, who have become increasingly restive and rebellious against oppressive government regulations and the hostility of the general uninfected public. Since Alex's son Daryl is a Number 16, doomed to an early death, and Alex is himself a 17, he soon sympathizes with the outcasts and rebels. With his small world on the verge of civil war, CEO Croft

heeds Alex's advice and agrees to ease his oppression of the 16s and 17s, and to try to find a way to work with the Martians to cure the infected. Alex and his former lover Reba, now a 17 also, and her lover Zurko Carty, are sent as ambassador-hostages to Mars. But on the way there, alone with a computer full of scientific papers and data hitherto kept from him, Alex realizes why Croft has behaved so oddly—Alex has the key to curing both 16s and 17s, while Croft has been using the blood of the 16s as a geriatric drug for a small secret community of the powerful and rich. Croft must prevent the cure or lose his source of life-extending enzymes. Croft has rigged the ambassadorial spacecraft as a weapon against Mars's greatest city, intending to kill millions, destroy Alex and his knowledge, and keep the war going so he can remain in power.

Alex, Reba, and Zurko manage to divert the bomb-laden spacecraft; Alex and Reba survive to find refuge with the Martians. Together the Martians and Alex use the Alien Weapons Platform to decommission the alien nanogens on Earth and on Mars, the 16s quickly recover, while the 17s are saved from evolving into machines by a Martian breakthrough involving mind-transference into clones. Croft is disposed, and Alex and his family are able to return to the family home in formerly-infected Pennsylvania to start a new life.

Really, this is just too much. I didn't even mention the sections which deal with Alex's former wife, her new husband, and their son Daryl. Or the bits of narrative that dramatize how the infected 16s and 17s are shunned and abused. Or explain how the war with Mars began. It's a pretty big book, but not nearly big enough to allow Mackay to develop any aspect of his tale adequately. His characters just aren't developed enough (we need to know lots more about Alex's marriage, his son, his divorce, his relation with Reba). The plot lurches here, there and everywhere abruptly. The back story of the alien attack on Earth, and Earth's successful defense, is almost unrolled; intriguing scenic details are skimped (e.g. the nature of Chincoteague Bay prison).

In his review of *The Meek* for this publication (NYSF 159), Matthew Appleton noted that, considering its density of plot, it was surprising that the story hadn't been inflated into two books, or even "provided the first two-thirds of a trilogy." I'd like to repeat that point with regard to the present book: There's really enough here in *Omniflix* for three well-developed linked tales: the story of the alien invasion and repulse, introducing Croft, Alex and his family, and the nanogen infections; the story of Alex and his family's struggle to make their way in the post-war Defederacy (ending with the discovery of the new alien threat); and the story of Alex's struggle to solve the puzzle of the alien nanogens and overcome Graham Croft's schemes.

There are a lot of interesting ideas packed into *Omniflix*, and it's a shame Mackay couldn't have had more time and space to explore them. This is an interesting story made frustrating by its overhasty narrative pace. I wish him a larger canvas for the future, for it is clear Scott Mackay has a lot to say, and the skill to say it. ▶

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Krypton Nights by Bryan Dietrich

Lincoln, Nebraska: Zoo Press, 2002; \$14.95 tpb; 54 pages

reviewed by Curtis Shumaker

Krypton Nights, winner of the 2001 Paris Review Prize in Poetry, is a multilayered, densely packed revision of and commentary on the Superman mythology. While the subject matter is familiar to the general first audience, the book's sophisticated poetic technique and sometimes ostentatious allusions may make it difficult for readers who are more comfortable with fiction and not well versed in poetic traditions.

The overall structure of *Krypton Nights* is straightforward—an introductory poem, "I Kent," is followed by four sections, each containing seven poems. Each section is told in the first person voice of, in order, Clark Kent/Superman, Jor-El, Lois Lane, and Lex Luthor. This approach is a major factor in the book's success. With well-identified speakers, the poems break down many of the barriers created by the titles that separate them, and the voices weave together narrative strings. The poetic voices express drama, angst, and humor, developing character insight so well that one could almost see them as word balloons in the panels of a Superman comic book.

The common theme that binds all four sections is the problematic relationship between ordinary, mortal humans and a super-powered, super-intelligent, apparently immortal being. Superman himself struggles with the ethics of solving humanity's problems in his section, "Autobiography of a Cape." From a remote space and time, Jor-El meditates in "The Jor-El Tapes" on the effects of sending a superior being to a civilization still grappling with its own identity crisis. "The Secret Diaries of Lois Lane" record the often humorous and moving thoughts of a woman who finds herself in the ultimate unequal relationship. Finally, in "Lex Luthor's Complaint," the mad genius scribbles out tracts from his cell in Arkham Asylum, explaining how Superman, not he, is the true threat to the human race.

To fully absorb *Krypton Nights*, one must realize that Dietrich is writing about three different Supermans. The first and most obvious is the Superman of popular American imagination, the selfless, uncomplicated hero of thousands of comic book issues, plus several films and television series. Dietrich liberally refers to the Superman myth, as well as assorted DC characters on its periphery, such as Lori Lammers, the Swamp Thing, Green Lantern, and the Legion of Superheroes. Such touches give *Krypton Nights* a lighthearted and nostalgic feel in places, which to some extent balances the darker aspects of the book.

The darkness comes mostly with the second Superman in the book, the sociopolitical Superman. This figure will be familiar to readers of *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and other works of the last two decades that explore the problems of placing superheroes in a realistic political context. For example, does Superman's x-ray vision violate the Fourth Amendment rights against unlawful search? Does his habit of swooping up bank robbers and taking them directly to prison cheat due process? Is taking down a super-villain with a blast of his heat vision an unconstitutional use of excessive force? Or, from a less legalistic standpoint, can society and individuals maintain their self-reliance and self-respect if they let a super being do for them the things they should do for themselves?

This political Superman has been a subject of discussion in history and literature for at least the past two centuries. After the rise of Napoleon, an apparent super-being in terms of genius and willpower, factions in Western culture began to speak of a new kind of man, an advanced being capable of mastering the seemingly impossible challenges posed by the governments and economies of the Industrial Age. This is Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the great being who transcends ordinary concepts of good and evil in the quest for progress and advancement. It is Wagner's Teutonic hero of myth who, not to be bothered by the trials of lesser men, fights for glory against cosmic forces. Finally, it is the superior race of the Nazis, willing to put aside the frailties of compassion and pity for their version of the greater good of humankind.

However, Dietrich's Superman ultimately belongs in the tradition of literature that reacts against these ideas. *Krypton Nights*, in a roundabout way, belongs alongside the works of Dostoyevsky,

which attack the notion that humans can transcend their nature—as with Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* who plots a murder to prove he has severed his bonds to the human weaknesses of guilt and fear, but which in the end only makes his weaknesses more apparent. *Krypton Nights* explores the ramifications of having an *Übermensch* in our presence, one who possesses the superior power and intelligence, but who perhaps has not entirely transcended human weakness.

The third Superman of *Krypton Nights* is Superman the god. At first sight, Superman in his tricolor body suit and cape seems more like a jester when placed in the context of the ancient gods, but consider his life: Superman was sent to Earth by a heavenly father, and grew up to perform miracles and to save the human race. This is not a new story; it is a very old one. From the beginning of the book, Dietrich connects Superman to his ancient origins with a quote from the *Zend-Avesta*:

He thought according to the Law, spoke according to the Law, and did according to the Law; so that he was the holiest in all the living world, the best ruling in exercising rule, the brightest in brightness, and most glorious in glory, the most victorious in victory. And at his sight, the demons rushed away.

Of all the allusions in *Krypton Nights*, the most common and most significant are the ones that superimpose a series of gods and savior figures onto the character of Superman. Connecting Superman to the mythic and the sacred reinforces the central question of the sociopolitical section above but places it in a cosmic frame. Should humanity trust its own ability to solve problems or surrender responsibility (and power) to a greater being?

II.

In "Autobiography of a Cape," Clark/Superman questions the role that has been given to him (or that he has taken) as protector and defender of Earth. He entertains fantasies of disappearing forever, either by becoming Clark Kent permanently, or by fleeing Earth altogether. In the first poem, "The Fourth Man in the Fire," he says,

... I find I suspect
this Superman I've become. Dressing down
is easier, the lie somehow less circumspect.

This poem also has one of the many historic/mythic/literary allusions that may click with many readers only after a reference search for their meaning and some analytical thought on how they apply to the poem at hand: Clark says he is less like Pericles and more like Prospero, that is, he feels less association with the great Greek civic leader and defender of Athens and more with Shakespeare's magician in *The Tempest* who withdraws from society to an isolated island. (Tangentially, it could also allude to the Prospero of Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," who walls himself inside his castle as plague kills his subjects.)

In "The Trials of Job," Clark uneasily considers how much power the world's governments have surrendered to him:

... The half seen
gestures of this politico, that pontiff,
the anchor's sly nod at half a hundred stations,
editors, my boss (most people, really, if
you want to know the truth), they, their nations,
whole parliaments have ratified me.

Also in this poem, Dietrich uses an interesting technique of word play based on line breaks. In the first stanza, he describes how he could "vanish, over lunch, say some strange event / horizon." Here, the phrase "strange event" has two possible meanings. One, when the reader pauses at the end of the line, that it is simply a strange event that Clark vanishes from his table at lunch, flying away faster than the eye can follow. The second, when the reader considers the entire

In "The Else" Jor-El gives a taste of poetic biology:

Think of your own
roots, the slow ages of ozone, oxygen
and carbon learning to share a common bond.

And finally, space travel in "The Curse of the Pharaohs"

Crossing the dark channel between folds between worlds,
he will arrive through the open maw of that jewel-toothed
gulf.

Science fiction poetry is often embarrassingly bad, but these lines are reminders that science and true poetry are not mutually exclusive.

IV.

In contrast to the dark and philosophical mood of Jor-El, "The Secret Diaries of Lois Lane" provide some light-hearted verse, though the concerns established by the first two sections always lurk beneath the surface. "The Wedding Party" begins with an absurd vision of the strange guests who would show up at a Lois/Superman wedding: "Oh God, and the party-crashers. Swamp Thing, / Solomon Grundy." However, like most of the Lois poems, what gaiety there is soon turns to melancholy thoughts:

Like one of those virgins I used to study
in the Gospels, should I trim my lamp,
prepare for the Bridegroom's uncertain coming?
Or is that long dead world's Last Son
impervious to my burning?

"His Maculate Erection" endows the section with the strongest above-board humor, yet still manages to touch on a key mythical motif that runs throughout the book: Lois fantasizes about what happens to Superman's sperm when they have sex in the shower:

There, in the drops of the porcelain dark,
following raveling threads of sewer,
a billion souped-up cells continue to swim,
blind and eternal, toward the light.

In a clever allusion to the immaculate conception myths, especially the one about the return of Zarathustra (which involves a virgin bathing in a lake infused with his immortal semen), Superman's reproductive cells work their way into suburban bathtubs, and

some months from now, maybe a year,
familiar tales will be retold, all the old
fables recycled.

On a more serious note, "Man or Superman" and "Neocropolis" pick up the theme of inequality, with Lois emblematic for humanity as a whole. In the former poem, she compares the dream of marrying a superhero with the reality, deciding that she can only live under his shadow and at his disposal. She can hide nothing from him, and he will always know more even about her own body than she. Would he keep from her the cancer only he can see, perhaps curing it without telling her? Would he keep from her the knowledge privy only to super beings?

... will you wonder
what he may have seen growing inside
you? What death he may have burned away
what left behind?

In "Neocropolis," Lois wonders how much Superman can truly know about humans since they share a fate unknown to him—death. When they fly over the great tombs and mausoleums of human history, she notes that

... he shook
his head, disgusted at what he could not see
as anything but wasted life.

If he cannot understand the basic human need to be remembered, how can he really empathize with humanity? If a human life is just a passing moment in his own life, how can he truly love Lois, or any individual?

Nothing that touches the afterlife
touches him. I wonder what he'll do then
when I'm gone? Or Jimmy. Lana. Perry. All
Metropolis?

V.

The inability of Superman to relate to humans on an equal level is central to "Lex Luthor's Complaint." Locked in Arkham Asylum, the DC home for the criminally insane, Luthor pens his manifesto, lucidly explaining how he is both sane and morally correct in his opposition to Superman. He is the megalomaniac who believes he is a savior, the Lucifer who believes he is a god. Ironically, Luthor, of all the speakers in *Krypton Nights*, is the most self-aware, the most in touch with his drives and internal agendas. He exhibits none of the moral waffling of Clark, nor any of the ambiguous motives of Jor-El. Luthor is pure in his contempt for Superman, and his reasons for it.

His first poem is titled "Midrash," appropriate since Luthor, like the ancient Hebrew theologians, sets out to rewrite scriptures, imposing his own interpretations on the Superman myths. In "Midrash" he tells us "how I do believe in law, in jurisprudence. / Not in spite of what I've done, but because." Echoing lines from Jor-El and even Clark, Luthor explains how Superman is the true threat to the law; he, not Luthor, is the usurper of humanity's rights and destiny. He compares the human race to the great statue with feet of clay in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Superman is

... the cobbled stone you've thrown
only at yourselves. He cannot stand
for what he must, by definition, break.
So I must break him for you.

(Once again, note the word play along the line breaks.) In the most damning lines in the book, Luthor argues that Superman's ultimate goal, overt or unconscious, is humanity's destruction. His tricolor costume is a "false trinity," and his paternalistic protection of the planet

will only last as long as he needs you
to serve his final longing, his heaven
brought down to earth. Krypton, I've heard,
was barren at the end. Do not mistake
his purpose. Though you may not believe
it now, already he has bruised your heel,
already he goes to prepare a plot
for you, a final potter's field.

(Compare this passage with the one quoted from Jor-El's "Curse of the Pharaohs.") In a parting shot, the poem makes a rather complex allusion, claiming that what Superman has taken from us is not "purely Occidental." Here, several meanings come into play; the first and most obvious is the play on accidental, suggesting again that Superman has a conscious agenda in undermining earthly authority. Another meaning stems from the term as applied to religions. In a somewhat flawed classification, the Occidental, the Western, religions are sometimes called religions of law, while the Oriental ones are referred to as religions of the spirit. Thus, Superman has stolen not only humanity's laws, but its spirit as well.

Although "Midrash" contains most of Luthor's sharpest attacks, the rest of the poems in his section elucidate his argument more subtly. In "The Dark Knight of the Soul," a poem sure to bring joy to hardcore DC fans, Luthor compares the costumes and attitudes of Superman and Batman. In contrast to the former's self-righteousness, Batman

skulks the streets, fighting
crime with crime, at least: bats make no bones
about hypocrisy.

The ears on his hood symbolize "the devil he denounces even as he serves."

"Through a Glass, Darkly," the final and longest poem in Luthor's section, as well as the book, attempts to tie the various threads of theme together. The first 20 stanzas take the poem's title, which is a quote from Paul's II Corinthians, and deconstruct it, both in a literal and a Postmodern sense. For instance, the narrative discusses the various meanings of the word "glass" as it applies to

contemporary audiences, King James-era readers, and Paul's original addressees. This poem is much more of a lecture, losing most of the personal narrative tone found elsewhere in the book, and as such seems out of place. Yet in the final two stanzas, it gives the resolution needed. Luther, in a more introspective move than any of the other narrators, turns inward to transcend Superman as an independent entity, and finds his true meaning is in ourselves:

... We, the world we read, are Torah.
Superman, the constancy of his conspicuous star,
is less than this. A big red S. A text
we read too lightly.

In the end, the S, which according to Clark was not even a letter originally, becomes a variable cryptogram, not only for Superman, but for all the myths, social, political, and religious, that are built on the concept of the superbeings—from Nazi to savior. If the poems in *Krypton Nights* are sometimes obscure, and if the questions they pose

are never satisfactorily answered, perhaps that is as should be. Like the best prose of, this book examines the paradoxes that haunt the human race, and opens doors to greater mysteries. In a broader sense, the text Luther refers to is not just Superman, or the three Supermans, but any text, any ideology, that we read too lightly, accept unquestioningly. In a recent interview, Dietrich addressed the problem of interpretation:

See, the poems, the "answers," are only ever questions. All words make us associate, and in association lies all beauty, all context, all meaning, all metaphor. What we want to believe, the "maybe," is what matters. Not what "is." Because there is no is. ... None of which means the same exact thing to each of you reading this. Does it mean nothing then? No, it means everything. Thus "maybe" is the universe. ▶

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Richard Parent Double Vision: Robert Sawyer's Utopian Dystopia

Robert J. Sawyer's ambitious new trilogy, *The Neanderthal Parallax*, presents a provocative challenge to literary analysis—its hybridized nature brings together utopian, dystopian, and traditional sf tropes. Though genre seepage is not a new phenomenon by any measure, Sawyer's series shifts tone and emphasis at breakneck speed, switching between its personalities with *Spy*-like suddenness. What begins as page-turning sf quickly becomes old-school utopia, abandoning all signs of sf. Soon enough, utopia itself is replaced with dystopia, and it is almost as if Bellamy's Julian West, from *Looking Backward*, had awakened in 1984, not 2000. For the rest of the trilogy, Sawyer flashes moments of each of his three modes before our eyes, never allowing any one of them to become dominant and thus define the series. Even more intriguing than Sawyer's deftness at writing in multiple styles, though, is his ability to make the *Neanderthal* gestalt an enjoyable read, no matter how much or how often each of the traditions interferes with the others. In this article I will explore the resonance and interference resulting from Sawyer's blending of genres and traditions into a single narrative which, I will argue, gives rise to a revitalized reformation of the utopian tradition.

The Neanderthal Parallax is composed of three novels, symmetrically titled *Hominids*, *Humans*, and *Hybrids*, describing the adventures and experiences of *Homo neanderthalensis* physicist Ponter Boddit and *Homo sapiens* geneticist Mary Vaughan. In the first book, *Hominids*, Boddit and his man-mate (more on this later) Adikor Huld inadvertently punched a hole from their world of evolved Neanderthals to a parallel world of evolved *Homo sapiens* through a quantum computing mishap, stranding Boddit on the parallel Earth. The second book, *Humans*, continues the parallel-reality exchanges between Neanderthals and humans, as Boddit has further adventures in the human world and Vaughan travels to the Neanderthal world. Throughout, the nascent emotional and sexual relationship between Boddit and Vaughan grows and deepens.

In *Hybrids*, Boddit and Vaughan continue their cross-species romance and decide to use a Neanderthal DNA codon writer to conceive a child together—one of the many "hybrids" of the novel's title. The cultural differences between Barast and Glikson (the Neanderthal terms used throughout the series to designate his and her respective species), as well as the machinations of the scheming U.S. government and its secret think tanks, pose a series of obstacles for the lovers as they struggle to solidify their new relationship. Along the way, the trilogy's doubled stranger-in-a-strange-land premise allows for a potent blend of outsider and insider perspectives on the imagined world of the Barasts and on our own world.

Speculation, Criticism, Hybridization

As a speculative mode of fiction, sf usually engages in cultural criticism of some sort. Without a firm, comprehensive sense of the world as it is, the sf writer is unable to speculate on what might be. For speculation to function, it must be plausible, which is a function

of the author's ability to discern trends that are immanent but not yet fully emergent in contemporary culture. A true sign of the sf author's skill, then, is his ability to create plausible worlds, with "plausibility" being an indication of the correspondence between the author's creation—no matter how distant spatially or chronologically—and the present, and the level of insight the author's analysis of contemporary life demonstrates.

In Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax*, the nova that define the novel as sf are all introduced via the Barast Earth existing parallel to the more familiar Glikson one. Having an entire world to play with—though much, if not all, of Sawyer's extrapolations of an evolved Neanderthal world and its civilization are based on current research into hominid development and culture—allows Sawyer to depict the fictional Glikson world as being indistinguishable from our own. In fact, as in his earlier novel, *Calculating God*, Sawyer goes to great lengths to establish the Glikson world as not merely a recognizably realistic and unfantastic setting, but as recognizably *our* world. By staging the Glikson-world scenes at reasonably well-known, extant locations such as the University of Toronto, York University, and the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, and by including a multitude of references to current pop culture, popular culture, and a wide array of recent scientific research findings, Sawyer intensifies the reader's sense that the world and the time about which she is reading is her own. The reader is thus led to believe that Sawyer's criticisms of this narrative world are meant to be read as criticisms of our world.

Sawyer has titled the trilogy *The Neanderthal Parallax*, a sly double reference to the books' doubled settings on the Barast and Glikson Earths, as well as an indication of Sawyer's vision of the relationship between the utopian and dystopian elements of the trilogy. "Parallax" refers to the optical maps created through stereoscopic binocular vision—because our eyes see from slightly different positions on our heads, the brain is able to combine the two images into a 3-D representation of the world. Similarly, Sawyer positions the two Earths, one with strong utopian elements, the other strongly dystopian, in order to create a more complete, more realistic, more highly nuanced portrait of both fictional worlds and, at the same time, of the real world.

Utopia with a Pronounced Brow-Ridge

In traditional utopian narratives, (e.g., More's *Utopia*, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Morris's *News From Nowhere*), the imperfect protagonist reaches utopia, is given a tour of the environs and lectured by a knowledgeable utopian local, and then leaves or is ejected from the perfection of utopia. Returned to our imperfect world, the protagonist reports back on what he has seen, presumably to foster progress toward the more exalted state he has witnessed. In traditional dystopian fiction, on the other hand, the protagonist is not an outsider to the imagined world, but is a resident. This makes dystopian narration not so much travel reportage as the author's presentation of

the daily life of a dystopian subject, presumably presented to readers to prevent degeneration toward the abject state the author has imagined. In other words, both utopian and dystopian narratives advance an essentially optimistic vision of humanity. In the utopian mode, the author's imagined paradise is presented as achievable by current peoples, though often only through much long and difficult work described in the narrative as the already-achieved utopia's history. Even dystopian fiction operates on an essentially optimistic premise—though the protagonist may not be able to escape the dystopian world, the readers possess the power to effect change and avoid this undesirable future. Analyzing the form of Sawyer's optimism in *The Neanderthal Parallax* should, therefore, provide a clue as to whether the series is essentially utopian or dystopian in its worldview.

As the trilogy's titles suggest, the series focuses on the two parallel worlds, Barast and Gliskins, and on the eventual hybridization of their species and cultures. In Sawyer's formulation, the Barast Earth is a veritable paradise, environmentally unspoiled, unburdened by overpopulation, and free of practically all crime and violence. In most respects, Sawyer's world of evolved Neanderthals seems an ideal fulfillment of Ruth Levitas's pronouncement that "The essence of utopia seems to be desire—the desire for a different, better way of being" (181). Levitas's description is broad enough to include the traditional utopias as easily as contemporary texts, many of which—like *The Neanderthal Parallax*—deviate from the classic model of utopian literature. As Levitas explains, utopia "involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the 'collective problem' solved" (191). This definition seems an especially useful one, as it can accommodate the utopian elements in a non-utopian or hybrid text just as easily as texts whose narrative structure does nothing but depict a fully actualized utopian state, such as Book II of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax* approaches both the "scarcity gap" and the "collective problem" in interesting and culturally relevant ways. Following current anthropological and paleontological evidence, Sawyer's Barasts are strict hunter-gatherers, eschewing agriculture and the rise of the large cities that agriculture allowed. Because of the limited sustainability of the hunter-gatherer way of life, Sawyer portrays his evolved Neanderthals as being forced to avoid overpopulation through a strict policy of zero population growth. Additionally, the high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet of hunter-gatherers closely resembles current diet crazes, such as the Atkins and South Beach diets. Sawyer seems to take great pleasure in describing the health benefits gained by the Barasts from their diet, especially when compared with the high-carb diet of the Gliskins. Sawyer's descriptions of the *nutritionally* utopian elements of the Barast world are wry and unanticipated pleasures, unusual for the genre.

Though utopia has been understood and depicted in countless ways, the paradigmatic model metaphorically and literally reflects the essential elements of Plato's *Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia*. As Laurent Gervereau explains, "Utopia presents itself as the epicenter of truth" (358), harkening back to both the circular nature of More's *Island* and Plato's *City*, as well as their enlightened systems of government and daily life. Ideal utopian rule prevents the unwanted, unexpected, and unpleasant from occurring. As the epitome of human social evolution, further change and progress is not only unnecessary but completely unwanted in utopia. Any further tampering could only bring about its diminishment.

Sawyer's Barast world can be interpreted as an attempt to portray what Gervereau describes as the utopian "end of time" in the most positive possible light (360). Though birth rates must be firmly regulated, couples do not exist in a state of continued procreative frustration. Instead of imposing birth control technology upon themselves, the Barasts in Sawyer's novels have reconfigured their social arrangement to maximize personal and emotional satisfaction, while preventing unwanted pregnancy. They achieve this through a system of universal bisexuality and enforced gender-segregation. For four days out of each month, "Two become One" on the Barast world, and opposite-sex couples freely cohabitate and have sex—each female Barast with her "man-mate," and each male with his "woman-mate."

The remaining days of each month, female Barasts live in the city centers, and male Barasts live in the outlying suburban rings. During this time, each Barast lives and has sex with his or her same-sex man-mate or woman-mate. As the female Barasts all live in close proximity in the city centers, their menstrual cycles are uniform and synchronized. This allows for the calculation of optimal times to schedule Two-becoming-One to prevent pregnancy. Only once in each decade is Two-becoming-One scheduled to occur at a fertile period, thus giving rise to the next generation of Barasts.

As a model for optimism, Sawyer's Barast world presents a utopian situation that has no real connection to our own worldview or lifestyle philosophies. No matter how enlightened we poor Gliskins become, we cannot achieve the Barast ideal without a radical reconfiguration of our sexual identities and relationships, a nearly complete rejection of the current mode of food production and consumption and a mass extinction of humanity (there are only 185 million Barasts on their entire globe, compared with the 6 billion humans on earth now). Of these, the first two might be considered par for the course in utopian thought, but the requirements of the last point make this solution unworkable and of questionable morality.

Dystopia in Our Own Backyard

In contrast to the idyllic Barast world, Sawyer's Gliskins Earth is depicted as being overcrowded, polluted, chaotic, prone to warfare, and filled with powerful individuals and governments twisted by perverse dreams of conquest, entitlement, and the accumulation of power and resources. In other words, it is easily recognizable as a mimetic representation of the real world. Sawyer's Gliskins Earth is replete with dystopian elements. For instance, on Gliskins Earth, unlike on the non-violent Barast Earth, women are not safe. Book One of the trilogy quickly introduces this theme through a major plot point: the rape of Mary Vaughan by an unknown assailant. Vaughan's reactions to the violation propel her into the trilogy's parallel worlds plot and motivate her willingness to consider an emotional relationship with Boddi. As the series progresses, we see that Vaughan's attacker has no plans to stop and mopes the female chair of Vaughan's department at York University. In his exploration of the Gliskins Earth, Ponter Boddi's prodigious olfactory sensitivity is a torment to him, assaulted by the ever-present stench of pollution that we have learned to ignore. Used to the low Barast population density, Boddi is appalled at the deprivations that poverty imposes on so many Gliskins. Attempting to foil the first Barast diplomatic mission to the Gliskins United Nations, a religious fundamentalist attempts to assassinate the visiting Barasts. And as if adding insult to injury, the U.S. government plans ways of eradicating the Barasts so that the U.S. can colonize and control the unspoiled environment of the Barast Earth. Add to these large-scale issues the multitude of small observations Sawyer includes on the daily indignities, wrongs, and prejudices Gliskins must both perpetrate and endure, and the dystopian portrait of the Gliskins Earth—our Earth—is devastating.

In his book *Scrapes of the Unintended Sky*, Tom Moylan summarizes the traditional dystopian plot as following the "everyday lives of everyday people." He explains that "The story line then develops around that alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system" (xiii). In the case of *The Neanderthal Parallax*, Mary Vaughan's journey to dystopian awareness begins with her rape and continues throughout the trilogy as she discusses, and is often forced to defend, the unpleasant aspects of her world. Put into sharp contrast by Boddi's descriptions of, as well as her own experiences in, the Barast world, the dystopian nature of the Gliskins world becomes an inescapable conclusion for Vaughan. Traditional dystopian narratives such as this one support Mark Rose's conclusion that "The issue in these narratives, then, is ultimately one of opposed points of view, and thus the dystopia . . . readily becomes a drama of consciousness" (167). This is doubly true in Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax*, as the plot follows both Mary Vaughan's evolving awareness and consciousness of her position in both worlds, as well as the phenomenon of consciousness as it developed, evolved, and is still being manipulated on both worlds.

M. Keith Booker points out the connections between utopia and dystopia, paranoia and consciousness, glibly noting that "one man's

utopia [is] another man's dystopia" (15). The interconnection between utopia and dystopia entails the interpenetration of utopia and dystopia at all points, differentiated only by the subjectivity of perception. This commingling led Gary Westfahl to coin the neologism "pointopia" to describe more accurately the conflated states of utopia and dystopia in most of texts. For Westfahl, a pointopia "presents a clearly imperfect society; is a story with an ongoing melodramatic conflict between good and evil; and is a story where scientific progress and inventions provide moments of joy and incremental improvements but promise no final perfection" (229). Westfahl's pointopias lead not to the establishment of utopia but rather to a heightened awareness of the factors retarding such an establishment.

Sawyer adds a welcome complication to his utopian and dystopian worlds—providing enough information about each to recognize the incompletely perfect or imperfect nature of each world. In other words, Sawyer's Barast Earth contains few but severe dystopian elements, and his Gilksin world similarly contains a few moments of goodness and beauty. Thus, *The Neanderthal Parallax* seems an excellent example of Westfahl's notion of pointopia. As we have already seen, Sawyer's utopia is out of reach unless we countenance deliberate depopulation and eliminate 97% of currently living humans. Sawyer's dystopia, as well, works to preclude the usual sense of optimism. Instead of presenting his readers with a relatively comforting "if this goes on" scenario, Sawyer has gone to great lengths to force the realization that "this is *already* going on." Thus, no amount of societal correction can avert the dawning of Sawyer's dystopia and, simultaneously, even achieving his pointopian utopia would necessarily entail the creation of dystopian elements.

Sawyer shows us that maintaining the static near-perfection of civic order and peace of the Barast utopia requires that its members adhere to strict rules and impose harsh penalties for individuals who break the laws. The tremendous physical strength of the Barasts makes them lethal, able to kill with a single punch to the skull. Regulating against this potential destructiveness is a legal prohibition against violence that mandates that anyone convicted of violence will be executed and, to eradicate any genetic predisposition toward violent behavior, all individuals sharing fifty percent of the criminal's genetic code (parents, siblings, and children) are immediately sterilized.

Compounding the dystopian impression, Sawyer achieves Ruth Levitas's utopian goal of solving the "collective problem," the dilemma of how to exist as an independent individual while remaining an obedient member of a social collective, through the introduction of mandatory "companions." During childhood, each Barast receives an artificially intelligent computer monitoring device implanted in his or her forearm. These companions connect the Barasts to the global information networks, but they also record every action undertaken, the location, and the spoken and written words of each Barast. These records in the "Alibi Archives" at the central "Hall of Records" are kept absolutely private except in case of legal investigation. In this way, the safety of all Barasts is ensured, as false accusations and mistaken identities are impossible. It also, however, turns the Barast Earth into a surveillance state reminiscent of Orwell's "telescreens," even if the Barasts welcome the trade.

Furthermore, as might be imagined, Sawyer's Gilksin protagonist, Dr. Mary Vaughan experiences a great deal of trouble adjusting to the segregated lifestyle of the Barasts. She follows Boddit to his world, intending to spend time with him in his own environment. Her unhappiness at learning that she will be required to live with the females for the majority of each month, however, is eclipsed by her feelings when she realizes that during this time Boddit will be living and sleeping with his man-mate, Adkor Huld. If Sawyer's resolution of Vaughan's reservations feels a bit facile, it is necessary, as the progression of the novels reveals that these books are more concerned with detailing Mary Vaughan's development than Pontor Boddit's. Vaughan must find a way to adapt herself to the pointopian Barast world, even as her expectations of a perfect world are, in her view, cruelly betrayed. Vaughan's emotional ideals, her sexual orientation, and her notions of privacy are all violated by Barast society. A major subplot in the third volume of *The Neanderthal Parallax* involves Vaughan's attempts to reconcile herself to living as a Barast so that she may establish a life for herself with the Barast she

loves. This does not represent a dystopian element in Barast society, as much as it demonstrates the subjectivity inherent in delineating dystopian from utopian. And, of course, the subjective perspective arises here and is strongly influenced by the stereoscopic resonance of the two worlds. Boddit sees nothing wrong with his society's sexual segregation but admits, after experiencing the lack of regulation and control on the Gilksin Earth, that sexual liberty is an appealing system. Similarly, Vaughan is initially repulsed by the easy bisexuality of the Barasts, but she comes to appreciate its utopian possibilities as compared with the prejudice and violence homophobia causes on the Gilksin Earth.

Reading Hybrids/Reading *Hybrids*

So what is the reader to make of Sawyer's mix of utopian dystopias and dystopian utopias, dressed up in sf finery? Reading the books as straight sf—a reasonable strategy for anyone familiar with Sawyer's previous work—yields a frustrating and unsatisfying experience. The books are simply too full of utopian expository dialogue to be exciting. Long stretches of time—though logically established through quarantines, long car and airplane rides, and other periods of stasis—interrupt the flow of Sawyer's plots. Sawyer seems to have recognized this and incorporated tension-filled subplots into each book, as if to help the reader through the slower bits.

Obviously, the utopian tradition requires these sorts of lengthy descriptive and "historical" passages, a fact that can make reading the classic utopian novels difficult for readers accustomed to modern notions of pacing. But even when read on their own terms as utopian novels, *The Neanderthal Parallax* remains somewhat off. The pointopian nature of both Barast and Gilksin Earths seems to contradict the utopian project in the novels, as the Barast world explicitly demonstrates that though it's better than ours, it is still not perfect. In this sense, then, the Barast world fails to meet the traditional requirement for utopia—it is neither perfect nor static, but continues to struggle with its own problems and eagerly anticipates assimilating Gilksin technologies and culture. The very progressiveness of the Barast worldview is mutually exclusive with utopianism. Further, Mary Vaughan's solution, her own hybridization of Gilksin and Barast worlds creates, in her own words, "The very best—of both worlds" (394). Navigating between the pointopias on each parallel earth, Vaughan becomes a utopian singularity. Sawyer's solution to the problem of utopia, then, is to reject social change altogether, instead advancing a notion of solipsistic individualism.

On its surface, the most satisfying approach to *The Neanderthal Parallax* is as dystopian literature. As I mentioned in my review of book two of the trilogy (*NTRSF* 177), Sawyer's cultural criticism is consistently astute and biting ... and provides readers with definite pleasures. Reading the first book, *Hominids*, during a tense visit to Manhattan during the holiday season, I found myself agreeing with everything Sawyer wrote about Boddit's views of the Gilksin world, laughing aloud at times, so relieved was I to read about someone else suffering from the same miserable, overcrowded, and filthy conditions I was forced to endure. However, Sawyer's resolution of many of the dystopian themes in the trilogy seems open to charges of reduction and stereotyping.

Sawyer's depiction of Gilksin men ... for instance ... is, with only one exception, uniformly negative. In *The Neanderthal Parallax*, the only good man is Ruben Montego, a Jamaican physician who first treats Pontor Boddit upon his arrival on the parallel Gilksin Earth. Aside from Montego, the rest of the Gilksin men in the trilogy are depicted as rapists driven psychotic by political correctness and affirmative action, cold-blooded murderers, or government-sanctioned sociopaths. Sawyer ties his narrative perspective to Mary Vaughan, whose traumatic rape experience makes her distrust Gilksin males, which helps to explain the consistently unfavorable descriptions of Gilksin men and their motives. It also, however, enables an old and patently offensive stereotype about female sexuality.

Sawyer's depiction of Barasts as being inherently bisexual is an interesting speculation, and leads to many intriguing consequences and observations throughout the trilogy. Importantly, though, it also establishes an immediate conflict with Mary Vaughan's heterosexuality. If Vaughan is to form a hybridized life with Boddit, she must adapt

herself to the Barast sexual dynamic and become bisexual, which she does, though admittedly only after hundreds of pages of soul-searching and squeamishness. In a nice glimpse of psychological depth, Sawyer allows Vaughan to second guess her attraction to Boddit, wondering whether her feelings are caused by the fact that he is a Barast ... and therefore not a Gilksian male, like her rapist. But the fact remains that, after her rape, Vaughan becomes bisexual and lives most of the time in a lesbian relationship with the Barast who will eventually become her woman-mate when Two-are-not-One.

Finally, *The Neanderthal Parallax* is obsessed with the question of the validity and origin of religious experience, returning to issues raised in Sawyer's earlier novel, *Calculating God*. That book depicted a lengthy debate between an atheist human paleontologist and an alien whose race implicitly believes in the existence of God. Throughout *Calculating God*, the human and the alien each presents reasons for his belief or non-belief, and each counters these with scientific or theological refutations. The debate is only resolved by an Act of God, the creation of a shield protecting both Earth and the alien homeworld from the destructive energy of a new supernova. Both recognize that only God, or a being indistinguishable from God, could have created such a shield, and so scientific disbelief is shown to be logically incompatible with the reality of God's existence.

In *The Neanderthal Parallax*, Mary Vaughan and Ponter Boddit engage in many lengthy discussions of religion, as Vaughan is a practicing Catholic and Boddit (like all Barasts) is a complete atheist. In the third novel, *Hybrids*, Sawyer introduces current scientific research about a possible neurological basis for religious belief and experience. The persistence of belief on the Gilksian Earth, and the complete lack of it on the Barast Earth, Sawyer explains, is caused by the development of a "god organ" in Gilksian brains during evolution. Late in *Hybrids*, fluctuations in the Gilksian Earth's magnetic field result in the stimulation of each Gilksian's god organ, producing a global outbreak of "religious" visions which are thus revealed to be merely electromagnetic hallucinations. Like the supernova shield in *Calculating God*, the Gilksian "god organ" conclusively settles the debate over the validity of religious experience and belief, though this time granting victory to the atheists. The complete reversal of position from his 2000 novel, *Calculating God*, to the 2002-2003 time span of *The Neanderthal Parallax*, is intriguing, but Sawyer's reliance on conclusive proof lacks subtlety. A more nuanced psychological depiction of Vaughan's loss of faith, as in Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, would have been welcome.

Of course, the solution is to read *The Neanderthal Parallax* as a hybridized form incorporating utopian traditions, dystopian traditions, and classic sf in a blend that, though not free from

difficulties, nevertheless manages to remain consistently thought-provoking and entertaining. In this, Sawyer has succeeded in bringing the utopian form into the twenty-first century while avoiding the danger of falling into utopian stagnation and boredom. An excellent example of this is Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, the utopian volume of his *Three Californians* trilogy. Though *Pacific Edge* is extremely well-written, the book labors under the burden of the fundamental problem that utopia—perfection achieved and maintained through stasis—is boring. *Pacific Edge* lacks the drama of the other two books in the series, *The Wild Shore* and *The Gold Coast*, written in the apocalyptic and dystopian modes, respectively. Sawyer, though, infuses just enough dystopia into *The Neanderthal Parallax* to create tension and avoid the sometimes over-sweet tone that afflicts the utopian tradition. In addition, Sawyer's addition of traditional sf elements keeps the books moving along at an enjoyable pace overall. Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax* suggests that the utopian mode, though it lacks the scintillating of dystopian or sf narratives, can bring valid and valuable insights and perspectives to contemporary literature. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the popularity of the series indicates that current readers are having no trouble navigating the shifting registers Sawyer employs; They seem to be thoroughly enjoying his hybrid vision of the modern utopian narrative. ►

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Year 1953: Notes on *The Space Merchants* and Collaboration

Having just read at the *Locus* website Rich Horton's notes about the "Retro Hugos," whose justification mainly is, as he pointed out, fun, I feel the urge to respond in the spirit, naturally, of fun.

Several things strike me about his comments. He lists some of the novels that appeared in 1953, that year being the one celebrated by this retrospective award. All are classed as "classics," a word bandied about a great deal in the field, and usually applied to books whose titles everyone knows but whose texts not everyone has read; there are a lot of classics, after all. One of these books, however, is Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, to my mind one of the great short novels of the twentieth century. It strikes me as an odd and amusing exercise, to put any other titles, however good they might be, against it. It is a novel triumphs on the strength of its beauty and integrity, its language and its ideas. To put it up for a "Retro" seems a bit of silliness—which, naturally, is fun.

It also strikes me as interesting that he forgets to mention the one novel of its time that nearly made science fiction respectable—a novel that won attention in sectors of society normally oblivious to science fiction, at least outwardly, and that distinctly won the attention of a literary lion Kingsley Amis. I mean *The Space Merchants*, by Pohl and Kornbluth, published in serial form in 1952 and in book form in 1953. This publication history probably puts it outside the "Retro Hugo" pale for 2004. On the other hand, Horton gives the appearance of having paid meticulous attention to detail in citing other novels of note that first appeared in book form in 1953, which had their genesis in earlier magazine works.

Kornbluth was hardly Bradbury's inferior in his use of English, and superior to Bradbury in intellectual rigor. *The Space Merchants*, however, is one of those odd creatures propagated within the science fiction fold, the collaborative novel. While I barely know the lineage of collaborative novels within the genre, I am struck by the fact that I can look back on science fiction and have collaborative names appear readily before me, and cannot do the same in "mainstream" fiction. This may be an artifact of my shallower knowledge of mainstream fiction, or it may reflect something actual. In mainstream fiction, the ascendancy of the author, or the cult of the author, is striking. Ezra Pound would not have thought to have given himself co-author status on "The Waste Land," for instance.

Pound's interventions were not the sort to affect the monolithic nature of the authorship behind the work. In science fiction, however, collaboration must have seemed as natural as it seemed in popular songwriting. Eando Binder is the early name that comes to mind. Cyril Judd is a later one, immediately followed by the most famous collaborative byline in the field, which was Pohl and Kornbluth.

How interesting it is that Kornbluth was not only half of Pohl and Kornbluth, but also, with Judith Merrill, half of Cyril Judd. Before that, Kornbluth was part of various other names: Arthur Cooke, Scott Mariner, Martin Pearson, and Ivar Towers. Even one of his own specific pennames, S. D. Gottesman, covered a collaboration, much as Dirk Wylie's own name covered a collaboration with Kornbluth. Pohl, too, went on to become half of Pohl and Williamson, although it was his background as half of Pohl and Kornbluth that most raised him to the prominence he achieved—specifically the half of Pohl and Kornbluth behind *The Space Merchants*.

The odd thing about Kornbluth's collaborations is that he did so exceptionally well on his own. His solo novels are superior to his collaborative ones, with perhaps only *Gumner Code* matching them for soundness and tautness. Whether his short solo works are superior to his collaborative ones I cannot say, not having found copies of many of those collaborations, which were mostly juvenilia. It is probably pertinent to point out, however, that several items of Kornbluth's solo juvenilia have survived in print up into the current scene, and also to point out that several of these are considered memorable among living readers. In fact, all of his solo juvenilia was published within this last decade as part of a volume that went into at least a second printing.

I can only conclude that the cult of authorship was a weaker thing, within science fiction, than outside it. When Kornbluth went to Merrill, holding in his hands a fragment she had written, and said to her, "Hey, I think I can do something with this," he held the writing itself to a higher level than the concept of authorship. At very least, the idea that authorship was monolithic did not come first and foremost to mind.

He probably just thought the writing looked interesting, doable, and, naturally, fun. ▶

Screed (letters of comment)

Christopher Priest, Hastings, East Sussex, England

It's taken a while for the January issue of *NYRSF* to reach me (or the relevant pages, at least), so I've only just seen David Brin's review of my novel *The Separation*. I'm concerned about two short sections of the review which are in factual error and which I feel misrepresent the book.

Firstly, on page 10, Brin says that in order to set up what he calls my Nabokovian wish-fantasy about the British contribution to the war, I must offer one central excuse, that "we weren't making a difference anyway."

By quoting them directly, Brin makes it appear that those words are found in the book. They aren't, and neither is the sentiment they contain.

Secondly, in his penultimate paragraph, Brin describes the book's "most amusing Priestian rationalization," which is that "the character with his strongest authoritarian voice calls Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler morally equivalent."

No one in the book says that, it doesn't appear in the narrative,

and I don't think it. Even today, a comment like that about Churchill would cause deep resentment in this country, and I want no part of it.

Andy Sawyer, Liverpool, England

Your editorial in issue 187 about the lack of mid-future scenarios is of interest. Like you, I think, I put it down to the effect of political positions—although I think Ken MacLeod is one of the few writers who does/did some interesting work in this field.

More generally, it was notable that the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries saw considerably less of an engagement with popular-futurist "What will life be like in a hundred years' time?" questions that were (or seem from our viewpoint to have been) common at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I think the reasons for that have been extensively rehearsed but it's a shame that the fact that we're living in the final future seems to suggest that we needn't look forward any more.

Spring Things



Albert Goldfarb © David Hartwell

Many of you have responded to our solicitations for reviews and essays, and this is one of the rare moments in *NTRSF* history when we have an inventory of essays and reviews ready for the next issue and the one after. We have been in this position for a couple of months now, and as we remarked in the last editorial, it sometimes allows us to build issues with more structural and thematic unity than is normally the case. This issue is our more usual diverse assortment of reviews and essays. But we can see some interesting possibilities for the next couple of issues.

That's a good thing, because we are all heavily committed for the coming summer, and need to get ahead. First off, our stalwart managing editor, Kevin J. Maroney, has found full-time employment for the first time since 2001, which will surely make his life richer and much fuller.

I recently traveled to Chicago on the invitation of *Poetry*, to speak on a program at the Newberry Library with Albert Goldfarb on sf and poetry. (Some of you may not know that *NTRSF* was founded in 1988 by the staff of *The Little Magazine*, which for 22 years published contemporary poetry and fiction, and whose editors over the years included among others Barbara Damrosch, Thomas M. Beeler, Marilyn Hacker, Thomas M. Disch, Carol Emshwiller, John Silbessack, Lyndall Gordon, Isobel Barzun, Joe Millicia, and Mark Kramer. There's much mention of magazine meetings in Samuel R. Delany's 1984. Back issues of *The Little Magazine* are still available, packed away in my basement.)

That Wednesday evening in Chicago was very pleasant (see picture), and Albert and I plan to recap some of it at the ICFA in Florida next March, where Albert will be a special guest.

For the first time in many years, I did not attend any sf convention on Easter weekend, nor will I on July 4th, though I plan to return to old habits next year. But Kathryn and the kids and I did go to the Fantastic Genres conference at SUNY New Paltz on May 1-3 and had a delightful weekend. It was a small conference, but combined some of the pleasures of ICFA with some of the pleasures of Readercon (which we will all miss this year).

By the time you read this, we will have seen some of you at Wiscon in Madison at the end of May and others at SFRA in Skokie in early June.

Somewhere in there Kathryn and I are going to finish an anthology, too. ▶

—David G. Hartwell
and the editors

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